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So, as the dust settles after the tornado of midnight launches, incessant TV ad campaigns and arguments of who had the most next-gen game, we step, blinking, into a new year. With a shiny black box (or two) under our TVs, what is it we all want? Games… and lots of them.

This first **games™** of 2014 sets out the battle plan for the most impressive onslaught of cutting edge videogames ever. We have gathered the most compelling releases into one large Game Changers feature right up front.

Find out how Bungie is planning its most ambitious game ever in *Destiny*. As Xbox One, PS4 and Wii U are all reclassified as current-gen consoles we explore why titles like *Tom Clancy's The Division* still sit firmly in next-gen territory, with a realistic New York to explore and thousands of online players to join you in Times Square for the party.

Then there are the games you will be playing before you know it. *Titanfall* is set to freshen up the FPS genre with an emphasis on the narrative as well as the number of guns, *Thief* takes dark and moody gameplay to new heights and we talk to Nintendo's Kensuke Tanabe, the director of *Super Mario Bros 2*, about his new project *Donkey Kong Country: Tropical Freeze*.

If your gaming heritage goes back to the black and white days then, like me, you will be personally thrilled to also see a certain small egg with red boots in among our Retro pages. This ovoid will always be my first love.

So many games, and only a whole year to play them.

Nick Roberts

Nick Roberts
EDITOR IN CHIEF



390 Teletext

Q1. How many Pokémon were featured in the original Game Boy game?









UNLOCK YOUR PENSION

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2014: Game Changers

We look at the biggest and best games due for release this year

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(WHAT IS IT GOOD FOR?)

Xbox One Vs. PS4 Round One Results

(The battle is over, but the war has just begun)

→ Now that both consoles have been released, who seems to be coming out on top?

The first campaign of the console conflict draws to a close, and as the dust settles, it seems Sony is the victor. Not only has the PS4 achieved the impressive mantle of being the best-selling console of all time, it also smashed Xbox One sales figures on the home front here in the UK. Within 48 hours of launch, the PS4 managed to shift 250,000 units, making it the fastest selling console on domestic soil, easily beating the Xbox One's 150,000 sold units.

The PS4 also proved the most popular format for multi-platform releases – PS4 versions of *FIFA 14* and *Battlefield 4* outsold their Xbox One counterparts, which must have felt like a slap in the face for Microsoft, especially considering their gambit with bundling a free copy of *FIFA* in with each Day One console. The only cross-platform title that performed better on a Microsoft console was, unsurprisingly, *Call Of Duty: Ghosts* – which actually sold the most copies on the Xbox 360.

It's been clear for a while that Sony's strategy has been getting as many consoles out the door as quickly as possible; their initial production numbers and approach to their advertising campaign compounds that. It's a sobering lesson to Microsoft about the importance of PR and advertising in the run up to a console launch, too – after some frankly horrendous errors of judgment at E3 and Gamescom, the public reaction to the Xbox One was less than favourable. When Sony announced its enthusiasm towards working with indie developers, the tide seemed to turn even further – Sony was riding a wave of positivity that Microsoft couldn't do anything to affect.

We asked industry research analyst Michael Pachter what the next step in this uber-capitalist sales war should be, and he replied with a very sober "[Sony and Microsoft should] get games out and cut the price of the Xbox One". We can't help but agree – social media is still abuzz with criticism about Microsoft's price point; that extra £80 is a huge sticking point for players without a large amount of disposable income. Considering Sony is offering two free games (*Resogun* and *Contrast*) and a 14-day PS+ trial with every console, the choice for consumers on

Above Some Xbox One early adopters hold their consoles aloft in a moment of victory.



DATA STREAM → SONY'S PLAYSTATION 4 IS CURRENTLY OUTSELLING MICROSOFT'S XBOX ONE WORLDWIDE

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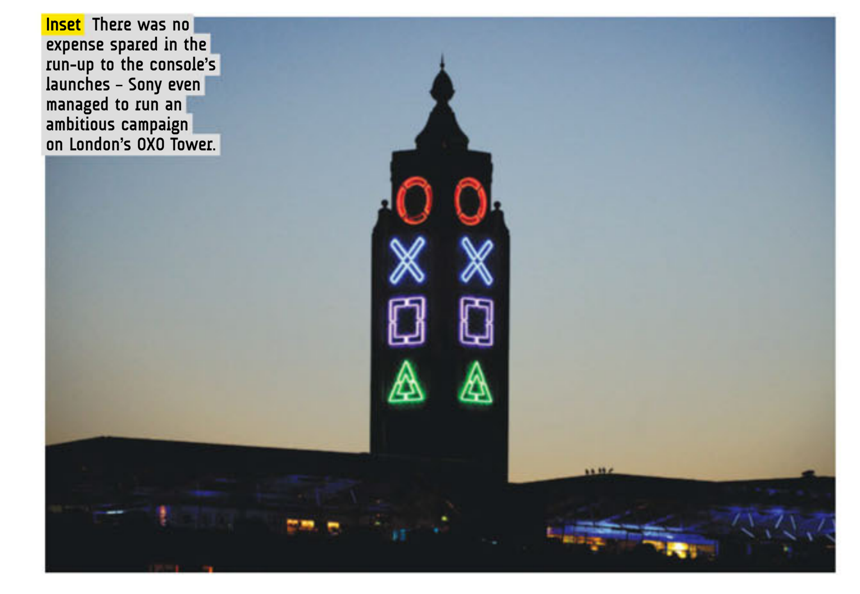
a Christmas budget seemed clear. Sony is also helped by the loyal fanbase it's built up over the past year or so – its attention to first-party titles such as *The Last Of Us*, *Journey* and *Ni No Kuni*, alongside the continuing value-for-money offered by PS+, has generated a loyal and impressive following for the company, at least if sales figures are anything to go by. This is another area Microsoft has fallen behind on – their response to PS+ was to offer a paltry alternative in Games With Gold, which thus far has offered only games at least four years old – and perhaps why a chunk of their audience has seemingly made the switch to PlayStation.

ACROSS THE ATLANTIC, however, Microsoft seems to be doing slightly better – when the infamous Black Friday came around, the Xbox One wrestled 31% of the day's sales whilst the PS4 took a significantly lower 15% (we think this could be down to consumers taking advantage of the Xbox One's more notable discount on the day – its higher price creating a larger markdown). Either way, there are still more Xbox One units gracing the shelves of the American super-outlets than there are PS4s, and that in itself speaks volumes. Pachter told us "there's no clear victor yet; both consoles are selling out. But Sony will win," he asserts, "because of [the PS4's] lower price point. Once Microsoft figures that out, it'll cut prices too."

> "Microsoft has stated that as more complaints are filed, more improvements to the Xbox One will be made"

It's easy to think Microsoft's sales have been disappointing, considering how the numbers look when held up against Sony's. However, both consoles easily outmatched their last-generation counterparts, with the Xbox One doubling the first week sales figures of its predecessor. The reasons behind this are myriad – the Xbox 360 and PS3 have been around for around eight years, plenty of time for consumers to get over-familiar with the hardware. The (almost) simultaneous launch of the consoles satiated hardcore gamers' thirst for something new, with each console catering for a specific area of the market.

It's curious to see sales do so well when first-party launch titles have been receiving such average scores – there seems to be a discrepancy between the products on offer and the demand for the consoles. Despite the likes of *Knack*, *LocoCycle*, *Ryse* and *Battlefield 4* coming in under par, the appetite for new hardware and upgraded cross-generational games doesn't seem to be affected. *Knack* even beat *Super Mario 3D World* in the week ➔



Inset There was no expense spared in the run-up to the console's launches – Sony even managed to run an ambitious campaign on London's OXO Tower.

CHARTING THE SUCCESS

This generation has seen the most successful launches of gaming history. To see how this year's figures stack up against its predecessors, we've compiled a handy bar chart for your viewing pleasure.

WEEK ONE UK SALES

Console	Sales
XBOX 360	75,000
XBOX ONE	150,000
PLAYSTATION 3	165,000
PLAYSTATION 4	250,000
DS	87,000
3DS	113,000
PSP	185,000
PSVITA	61,000
GAMECUBE	75,000
WII	105,000
WII U	40,000










Inset Microsoft even called in Master Chief to help with its Sydney launch – we assume he was there to help with crowd control, but that Xbox One in his hand suggests otherwise...

both games launched, suggesting that a lot of console pre-ordering gamers were keen to just play on their console, regardless of what critics were saying about the games.

On Twitter, however, it's estimated that for every positive mention the Xbox One received, the PS4 had two. Adversely, for every negative mention the PS4 received, the Xbox One had four derogatory mentions. However, in a pattern not in keeping with overall data, most Tweeters seemed to prefer the Xbox One's launch line-up, with Sony taking a particular hit when *DriveClub* was dropped from its PS+ launch offer. The continuous to-and-fro over social media has made for fascinating viewing over the past few months, and we're keen to find out if the publishers themselves are paying attention.

PENDING TITLES COULD also be drawing customers in – while the PS4 doesn't have any announced exclusives dropping soon, the Xbox One has *Titanfall*, which many are toting to be a system seller. Respawn and Activision's sci-fi shooter is one of the most anticipated releases of next-year, and its presence on the release schedule is a huge plus

"Both consoles easily outmatched their last-generation counterparts, with the Xbox One doubling the first week sales figures of its predecessor"



Inset Some Xbox One early adopters hold their consoles aloft in a moment of victory.



Inset Shortly after launch, Microsoft issued this handy Xbox One infographic.

WHAT THE READERS SAY

Who has more to say on the console war than the people that play them?

"For me it was a waste paying [£80 extra] for an Xbox One"
@FrancisReyes

"I'VE BOUGHT A PS4 & I'D SAY STICK WITH PS3 OR 360. BOTH NEW CONSOLES RELEASED WITH UNFINISHED HARDWARE & AVERAGE GAMES"
@Madeofstone2000

ONLINE RETAILER ZAVVI ACCIDENTALLY SENDS CUSTOMERS FREE PS VITAS, THEN DEMANDS THEM BACK



Above Could *Titanfall* be the saviour of the Xbox One?

for Microsoft (that *Uncharted* teaser Naughty Dog released a while back could soon put pay to that, though).

As consumers are acclimatising to the new generation, inconsistencies in the consoles' UI are coming to light – the Xbox One has substandard party play systems, and some instances have been reported of the console chewing up discs. Some PS4s have been reported to simply not work out of the box, and issues with the game updates have upset some early adopters of Sony's newest black box. As the new generation finds its feet, though, it'll be interesting to see who edges forward in the war as far as community feedback is concerned. Microsoft has already stated it's keen to listen to the community and has promised that as more complaints are filed, more improvements to the Xbox One will be made.

Once the Christmas figures materialise and the market analysts have their say, it'll be a lot clearer as to where each company stands. As it is, a successful launch was had all round and both Sony and Microsoft are feeling the strain on their supply of consoles. Whether or not we'll see Microsoft react to popular demand and drop the price of the Xbox One remains to be seen, but for now the price point doesn't seem to be affecting sales too badly, but the best perspective on each console's worth comes down to its street value. At the time of writing, when demand for consoles is incredibly high, PS4s are being sold on auction sites for £150 above their RRP whereas Xbox Ones are only going for £90 above RRP. Does that tell you all you need to know about where each console stands right now? Probably.



NINTENDOS AND NINTENDONTS

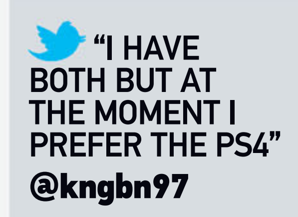
→ Can the Wii U claw back sales with a strong 2014 software line-up?

Unfortunately for Nintendo, the Wii U continues to struggle in the home console market. Released over a year ago, the console stumbled out of the starting block, selling less than 40,000 units in its opening weekend. Things didn't improve for the Wii's successor later down the line either – the GamePad-compatible device has reportedly only sold 140,000 units to date (which the Xbox One managed in its first two days…) It's peculiar that the Wii U has done so badly – the first Wii was one of the best-selling consoles of all time with an estimated 100 million lifetime sales. Pachter told us "the Wii U continues to be an afterthought", and with limited third-party support, delayed cross-platform titles and an overburdened reliance on traditional IP, it's easy to see why. Here's hoping the upcoming *Super Smash Bros.* and *Bayonetta 2* releases will help keep the console afloat in the wake of Sony and Microsoft's behemoth launches…



Inset Gamers gathered at events around the world to play the consoles before they hit their official release date.

"Holding off getting either. Got a load of PS3/360 games left to play and the launch window titles haven't inspired"
@john_hannon



"Until exclusives come out that I care for, neither #3DSChristmas"
@IainOakley

"I HAVE BOTH, THEY BOTH OFFER BENEFITS AND EXCLUSIVES THAT I WANT AND ARE BOTH CRACKING PIECES OF HARDWARE"
@GrizzlyKreiden



BLOCKBUSTER CLOSED ALL OF ITS STORES ACROSS THE UK. FINAL FILM RENTAL: THIS IS THE END →

(OPINION)

Next-Gen Launch Games Were A Bust – But Aren't They Always?

→ As the lukewarm software line-ups lead analysts to drone about this being the final console generation, their lack of perspective is made even more evident by comparing it to previous generation launches...

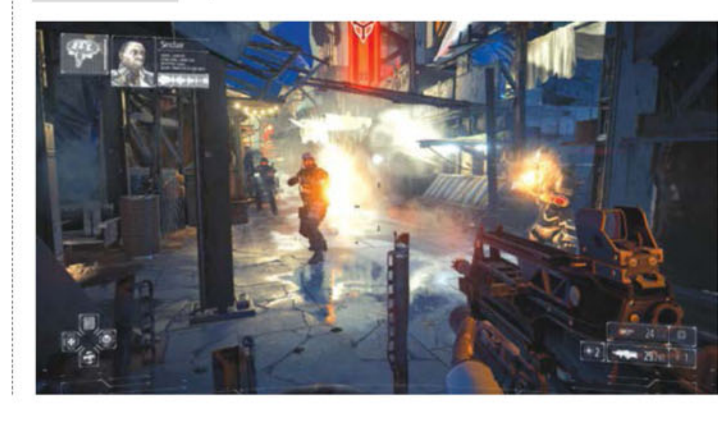
If anyone defines the PlayStation 2 by the games it launched with, like the original *TimeSplitters*, *Tekken Tag Tournament* or even forgotten water-'em-up *Aqua Aqua*, we haven't met them. A console is never defined by its line-up of launch titles, and besides a few notable exceptions like *Super Mario 64* and *Halo: Combat Evolved*, such titles are usually forgotten and are rarely considered synonymous with the consoles we remember. To judge this generation at all based on the launch is far too shortsighted – while the line-up has failed to yield any classic titles, a few strong entries like *Killzone: Shadow Fall* and *Dead Rising 3* (7 and 8/10 from us, respectively) demonstrate the potential of the new consoles, even if they don't offer anything ground-breaking in a creative sense.

History tells us that this always comes later – every remotely tuned-in consumer understands that developers better understand the tech they're dealing with as time moves on. The last generation started with *Resistance: Fall Of Man* and ended with *The Last Of Us*, and every generation follows a similar pattern of progression.

In the next year, we'll hopefully see more multi-platform titles that take full advantage of the hardware, rather than shipping cross-gen as well. Ubisoft has promised that the next *Assassin's Creed* will be created more with the next generation in mind. "I think 'next' next-gen is going to be for the next games," *Assassin's Creed IV* lead game designer Jean-Sebastien Decant told Gamereactor. This certainly is a fine thing to hear after *Black Flag* gave the franchise a mini creative renaissance – though we're certain the next game will ship on current gen, too – and perhaps other big franchises will receive a proper upgrade in game design around the same time, too.

The issue we're having is that the launch line-up of games have not really heralded any new ideas or even an enormous upgrade in visuals over the previous generation. The lack of proper 1080p in games like *Ryse* and *Battlefield 4* has been a bugbear for users expecting a spectacular technical difference in the way they did with the arrival of HD consoles in 2005 and 2006. Instead they're seeing incremental changes rather than the perfection in visual fidelity they'd mentally prepared themselves for.

There's a mixture of issues in this. Firstly, yes, people were hoping that the Xbox One and PS4 would offer visuals that are comparable to a higher-end PC and that big franchises like *Battlefield* and *Call Of Duty*



Below *Killzone* and *Knack* were the only two PS4 exclusives released at launch.



RIGHTS TO KINGDOM OF AMALUR WENT UP FOR AUCTION IN DECEMBER. UNFORTUNATELY, NO BIDS WERE MADE





Above Third-party titles bolstered both consoles' popularity at retail.

Left *Dead Rising 3* was undoubtedly a highlight of the next-gen launch titles.



Above *DriveClub*'s delay didn't appear to have an impact on PS4's sales.

would lead the charge on that, but part of this disappointment is also down to exaggerated expectations on the part of some users. These are, after all, machines that cost £430 and £350 – a top-of-the-range GeForce Titan graphics card (minus everything else needed to run a PC) costs around £800 right now. Consoles are designed to be democratic, targeting the largest userbase possible. Both consoles are powerful in their own right, more than enough for developers to get the best out of them over the ensuing years.

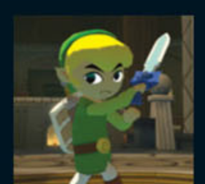
The concern is a creative one, then. Indie developers can be relied upon to creatively push the boundaries on consoles, particularly the PS4, in a way that they were only gradually able to over the course of a console's lifespan. Yet it comes down to a triple-A developer to push the visual boundaries of what these consoles achieve, and right now, it appears that the surface has barely been scratched of what PS4 and Xbox One can really do.

> "The surface has barely been scratched of what PS4 and Xbox One can do"

But what else would you expect at this point? The first year of owning a console is always vaguely regrettable for consumers. People who bought a Wii U had a pretty boring 2013 until we reached the final quarter, and anyone who picked up a Wii U over the course of the Xmas holidays paid less for the hardware and had more software to choose from. It's not unreasonable to think consumers who buy the console 11 months from now will feel the same way.

Labelling the launch as disappointing, then, is a fair criticism but also shows what a short memory we have as consumers. There is no console launch that has immediately landed with 100 per cent confidence in what the culture of that hardware offers, with software that perfectly reflects the potential of what's to come. This takes years.

HOW TO PASS THE TIME UNTIL NEXT-GEN GETS GOOD



Buy A Wii U

Super Mario 3D World, The Wind Waker HD, The Wonderful 101 and more – this time last year it was the Wii U's turn to be rubbish. Now it's come in to its own and you won't regret buying one.



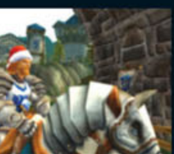
Clear your pile of shame

You can't have completed every good game of this generation. Are *Dishonored*, *Tomb Raider* and *DmC* still clogging up your backlog? Maybe the Xbox One and PS4 will be great by the time you've beaten them.



Go retro

Give this generation the finger, decide things were better when you were a kid and play only retro games from now on. Reading Retro Gamer is the perfect place to start.



Buy A PC

The only format that will be able to play both your existing and new games is a PC. You can pick up a next-gen comparable one for roughly £500, and you'll save enough money on new purchases to justify it.





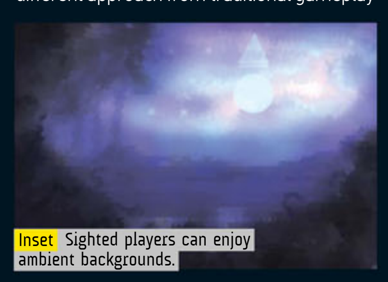

(MAKING WAVES)

Building Games Without Graphics

→ As the industry acclimatises to the visual fidelity of the next-generation of games consoles, we chat to Steve Willey and Jamin Smith of Incus Studios about Three Monkeys – a PC game without graphics

T*hree Monkeys* is a very different kind of game – it's ambitious, it's innovative and it's intriguing. Developer Incus Studios has decided to take the game down an audio-only route, crafting an RPG that's been specifically designed for the visually impaired community. The player takes on the role as Tobar; and in an interesting move for a title from a first-person perspective, Tobar is blind.

Steve Willey, producer and development manager at Incus Games told us that creating a game purely out of soundscapes and sonic environments requires a very different approach from traditional gameplay development. "Blind players are used to interacting with user interfaces in a different way, and one of the main problems we have is bridging that gap with visual players," he tells us. "We need to consider how much information they can take in without becoming mentally exhausted. Our approach to overcoming that was to start up with very simple control mechanisms, and then open up lots of different layers of how you can use weapons – like learning how to use your environment. Tobar has a bow, for example, and if you can hear some fire around you, firing the arrow through it will create a different outcome to a standard arrow shot."



Inset Sighted players can enjoy ambient backgrounds.

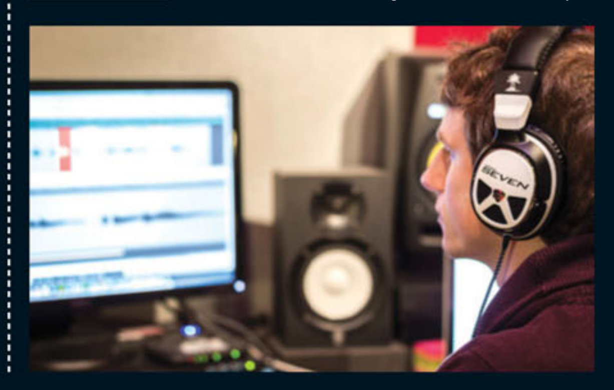
While the idea of contextual environmental attacks is nothing new, it's interesting to hear Willey talk about the idea of *hearing* fire – games like *Assassin's Creed* allow you to use items in the game world to dispatch your foes, but listening out for these prompts, rather than having a shiny signpost saying 'Use Me!' seems like a far more engrossing prospect - and one that won't detract from a game's latent realism. "We've also steered away from using the mouse," Willey tells us.



Below Willey told us that piecing together a game like *Three Monkeys* can take "ten times as long as a graphical game".

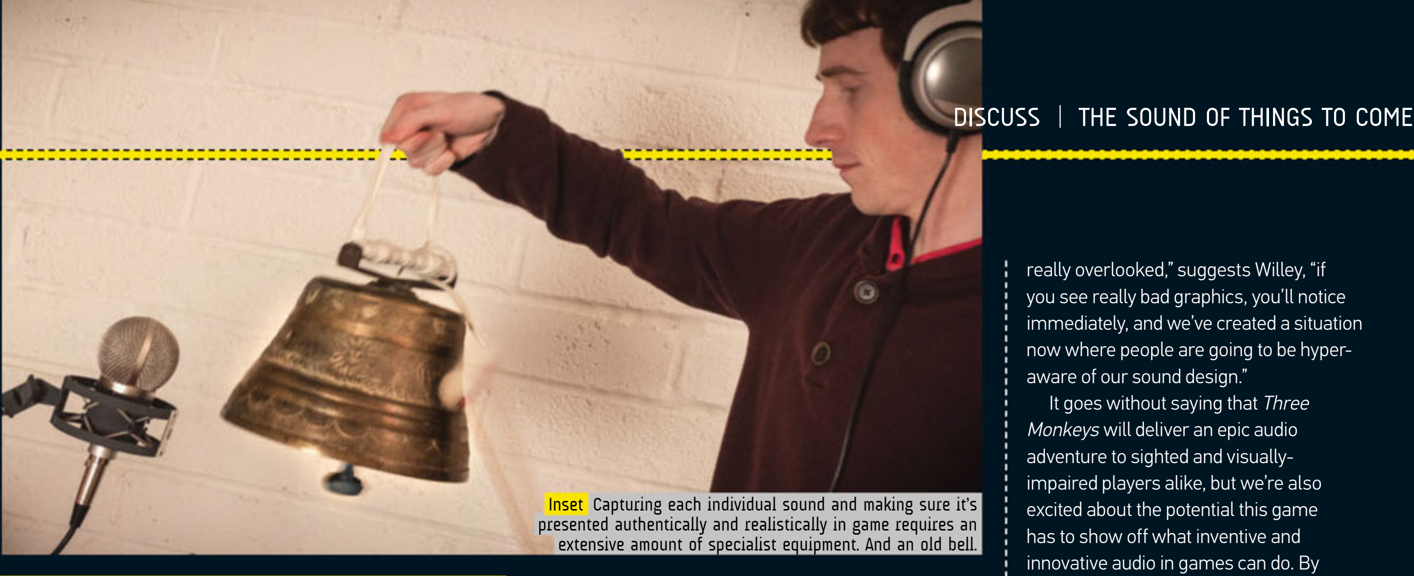
"We see it as an ambiguous control feature – unless you can see your cursor, it's very difficult to see where you've ended up. So we're using more buttons – if you're turning, you know that if you push a directional arrow once, it does *this* much, and that builds up an impression of how much you're moving".

Combining this binary aspect of movement with the use of binaurally captured sounds creates a game world that, we imagine, will work a little like it's on a grid. By moving toward and away from various sound sources, you will be able to work out what's where and decipher your surroundings based on the detailed audio alone, using an incremental scale which is far more suited to gradational keyboard inputs than a scrolling mouse input. This discrepancy between the analogue and digital inputs throws up an interesting problem that, we imagine, a lot of developers wouldn't find it necessary to consider so heavily. "Every problem we encounter, we manage to overcome," Willey





DESPITE PERSISTENT RUMOURS, SUPER SMASH BROS. FOR WII U AND 3DS WILL NOT RELEASE THIS SPRING



Inset Capturing each individual sound and making sure it's presented authentically and realistically in game requires an extensive amount of specialist equipment. And an old bell.

"There's such a reliance on the visuals... sound design is overlooked"
Steve Willey, Incus Studios

tells us, "but the more problematic the issue, the more interesting results come out of it. I think you tend to innovate more when you hit larger problems."

Narrative exposition must be approached differently in audio-based games, too – a lot of titles rely on their visuals to portray a world, to communicate story, to grant subtle exposition. *Three Monkeys* doesn't have that luxury, and writer Jamin Smith outlines some of the difficulties in making the world of Byzantia visible to a blind protagonist. "With this kind of game, you have to have your voice actors explaining exactly what happens – the environment will do that to an extent, but the character work has to be very heavy. Yosuke – the other main character beside Tobar – does all the 'heavy lifting'; she's the one that brings the narrative forward, and as such she's a really enjoyable character to write for."

The very fact that a game like *Three Monkeys* is being made shows a progression for the games industry – while there have been audio adventure games on the market before, we're not sure we've seen anything quite on the scale as Incus Games' effort. The importance of the game is two-fold – as it raises awareness of the visually impaired community within gaming culture, it also highlights the importance of sound design in the more conventional videogame. "Because there's such a reliance on the visual elements of games, sometimes the sound design is really overlooked," suggests Willey, "if you see really bad graphics, you'll notice immediately, and we've created a situation now where people are going to be hyper-aware of our sound design."

It goes without saying that *Three Monkeys* will deliver an epic audio adventure to sighted and visually-impaired players alike, but we're also excited about the potential this game has to show off what inventive and innovative audio in games can do. By playing on just one sense of what a player is experiencing, *Three Monkeys* has the ability to create a unique world for every player, shaped intimately by their own imagination. *Three Monkeys* could be the start of a whole new genre of game, and as Willey muses "the most photo-realistic graphics card is our brain, right?" we can't help but think he could be onto something revolutionary.



Above *Three Monkeys* generated a lot of positive attention after its first public outing at Eurogamer expo last year from sighted and visually impaired players alike.



Below The game will feature vague pieces of art like this. The artwork will correspond to the area the player is supposed to be in – mountains, forests etc.

SOUNDS LIKE...

Three Monkeys may be the first game embarking upon an epic audio-only adventure on this scale, but it certainly isn't the first game to experiment with a purely aural interface

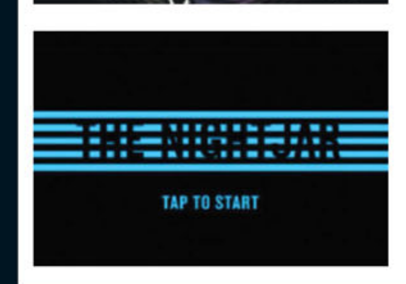


Vanished

■ Developed by iOS game-maker Pixel Heart, *Vanished* is an audial horror game that takes you to a world without light. You navigate through this visually muted world with the iPhone's in-built accelerometer and compass, using the touchscreen to orientate yourself and explore the sound-based world.

Papa Sangre

■ Described by developer Somethin' Else as a "videogame without video", *Papa Sangre* is another game whose environment is rendered entirely through binaural audio, with a purpose-built 3D-audio engine powering the game, which revolves around escaping a palace of the undead.



The Nightjar

■ Featuring the voice of Benedict Cumberbatch, *The Nightjar* takes players aboard a hostile spacecraft, guiding you through 14 tense levels of atmospheric sci-fi horror. Using similar tactics to Papa Sangre, the game maintains a level of tension and uneasiness that you don't find in more visually reliant games.



RAINBOW 6: PATRIOTS APPARENTLY "WASN'T WORKING" AND HAD TO BE REMADE ACCORDING TO UBISOFT

#TRENDING
with NowGamer.com's Ryan King



Awards Show Of The Year



No-one was expecting much from VGX, the awards show formerly known as the VGAs. Not really. It's a harmless bit of fluff stuffed with meaningless awards, mutual slaps on the back between hosts and PR and Doritos jokes on Twitter, the sort of ceremony that can only really exist in December when the games industry grinds to a halt for Christmas holidays. This year the timing was particularly awkward for the show, caught in the aftermath of next-gen (the launch games are already out!) and E3 2014 (here are the *real* next-gen titles!). When *Titanfall*'s big announcement is a new mech class, you know it's desperate.

Still, while VGX was a trainwreck, it wasn't entirely without some redeeming qualities. Hello Games unveiled *No Man's Sky*, which looked incredible. Naughty Dog had Joel from *The Last Of Us* replicate the notorious Antonio Banderas gif that had been doing the rounds on t'internet, as viral meme and acclaimed studio came together in a rare moment of glorious union. Host Joel McHale seemed bored with the entire affair, throwing endless jabs at co-host and Dorito overlord Geoff Keighley in an apparent attempt to himself amused, and the awkward chemistry between the two provided most of the uncomfortable highlights ("Have you ever not liked a game? Have you ever gone on record saying 'I don't like this game'?").

And that's all fine, because that's what VGX is. It's vacuous, pointless fluff, the sort of distraction that comes and goes without fuss or fanfare. But the reaction to VGX suggests that some gamers expected something else, something with a real weight and credibility to it. There was plenty of gnashing of teeth over McHale not taking the show and, by extension, the games industry seriously. Everything in front of McHale was mocked – the games, the developers, the games industry, his co-host and the entire show. McHale didn't just pierce through the thinly-disguised veil of PR bullshit as much as he set it aflame and repeatedly drew everyone's attention to it over and over again. It was actually somewhat refreshing.



■ *No Man's Sky* was VGX's biggest unveiling.

> It's harmless fluff stuffed with meaningless awards, mutual slaps on the back between hosts and PR and Doritos jokes on Twitter

So here's the thing – why does a videogames awards show need to be taken seriously to begin with? Why do we need McHale or anyone else need to validate our industry? There's a weird undertone concerning criticism of these shows that suggests for videogames to be taken seriously, videogames need an awards show that can celebrate them and highlight their brilliance, to educate an otherwise ignorant mass audience.

It is entirely unnecessary. We don't need a panel of judges and a small golden statue to tell us that *The Last Of Us* was one of the best games this year, nor do we need celebrity association to highlight why our medium is significant to those who remain uninterested. All videogames need to do is keep growing at their own pace, at their own time, and the gems of our industry – the *Journey*s, the *Skyrim*s, the *Minecraft*s, the *BioShock*s and so on – will shine through regardless of how hard they're being pushed at a daft, vacuous games award show.

And if there *is* an awards show to be taken seriously, VGX will never be it. It's too confused, pushing for credibility by drafting in names from within the industry such as Tim Schafer and while having those from outside the games industry host the event. The two can't really co-exist. You can't pretend games are credible enough to stand on their own merits while simultaneously drafting in the likes of McHale or Samuel L Jackson, who hosted the show the previous year, when they clearly have limited knowledge or respect for the medium.

So don't draft them in to begin with, and let's not cry over an awards show when they're almost entirely pointless to begin with. If we're that desperate for cultural acceptance that we're trying to pushing harmless fluff like VGX into a position where it can be heralded as something credible for the games industry, then perhaps it's not the awards shows that need to mature – perhaps it's us.

Ryan King is editor of



ROOM WITH A VIEW

With The Chinese Room's Dan Pinchbeck



Driving Miss Desmond



You get into the car for a nice drive. You turn the key in the ignition and suddenly a disembodied voice cries "Whoa there! Before we set off, see that wheel in front of you? You can turn that left and right! Let's try that!"

You sigh heavily and do as you are told. Right, time to set off. "Hold up there!" says the voice, "let's talk pedals." And so you repeat the process for the brake, accelerator, clutch, gears, indicators, windscreen wipers, radio, door handles… I've been driving a while now and not unreasonably, I just want to drive the thing. Learning to drive is important, but I don't need to learn all over again whenever I sit behind the wheel of a new car.

I love *Assassin's Creed*. Loved the first four games, but I've never made it past the first forty-five minutes of *ACIII* and I haven't even broken *ACIV* out of the plastic because I just can't take the endless in-game tutorials. Just like driving; I can understand the need for new drivers to learn the controls, but I don't want to suffer through it to 'learn' stuff I already know how to do, or given half the chance could figure out myself. Figuring it out is half the fun anyway. This isn't a problem specific to *Assassin's Creed* either. The *Tomb Raider* reboot held your hand like an overly protective Grandma so long you wanted to hurl Lara off a cliff just to shut it up. Even *The Last Of Us* seemed to not want to admit I might, as a gamer, be okay with figuring it out myself.

> The Tomb Raider reboot held your hand like an overly protective Grandma

Whatever happened to the training level? *Half Life*, *Metal Gear Solid*, *System Shock 2* — these had separate training levels accessible from the main menu. *Tomb Raider III* had the Croft Mansion, complete with secrets and the ability to shut the butler in the fridge, before letting you loose into the world without any further help. I really like this system. It gives newbies a chance to learn the game, but it lets experienced or adventurous players dive right on in and learn or re-learn the hard way. I miss them. It seemed a really elegant way of protecting player experience right across the board.

Ramping up difficulty or complexity in a game is fine, and it's a tried and tested formula of game design. But there's a difference between this and treating all players as equally inexperienced. Forcing everyone through the stop-start grind of tutorial isn't just dumb, it's damaging to the game experience and there's something a little patronising about it even for newbies as well. It's a game, not a car. I'm not likely to injure myself or anyone else playing it, even if it's a Wii game – it's okay to learn by experimentation and failure. I know I'm missing out on great stuff in the new *AC* titles, but until Grandma backs off, it's not going to happen.



Triple-A releases continue to be petrified of letting players discover things for themselves.

Dan Pinchbeck is the creative director at The Chinese Room, currently working on Everybody's Gone To The Rapture. His views aren't necessarily representative of **games**™.



Five Things About

Tomb Raider: Definitive Edition

While Crystal Dynamics' explosive revival of the *Tomb Raider* brand set a new record for highest sales in the franchise's history, it's no secret that Square Enix was disappointed. Well, the studio has found a way to alleviate some of that disappointment by re-releasing the title for PlayStation 4 and Xbox One. Here's what to expect.

1 A new look Lara
While the cover of the *Definitive Edition* sports the original character model used in last year's PC, PlayStation 3 and Xbox 360 release, the actual in-game Lara has been overhauled to more closely resemble her current voice/mo-cap actress Camilla Luddington. Even her hair has had a significant reboot, with TressFX hair-rendering technology.

2 It's not just a 1080p upscaling
"The team didn't simply up-res the game, they pulled it apart and rebuilt it with obsessive detail and new technology, finally allowing us to reach a vision for the game that we always wanted," said Crystal Dynamics in a statement. Lighting looks to be the most notable adjustment that has been made, overhauled to sell the physicality of the tropical terrain that Lara must endure on her journey.

3 A new generation of control
Looking to take advantage of some of Xbox One and PlayStation 4's additional bells and whistles, *Tomb Raider: Definitive Edition* will include Kinect voice commands that'll be used for menu navigation and during weapon customisation. On the Sony side, the DualShock 4 controller will also light up when you use the in-game torch. Cute.

4 All of the bonus content in one place
The *Definitive Edition* also includes much of the bonus content that was released as retailer-exclusive pre-order incentives including an extra tomb, additional costumes, and multiplayer content. It also includes *Tomb Raider: The Beginning*, Brady Games' art book *Tomb Raider: The Art of Survival*, alongside *The Final Hours Of Tomb Raider* documentary.

5 It's not just Crystal Dynamics' game
We imagine that Crystal Dynamics is quite busy at the moment with the confirmed *Tomb Raider* sequel, which is why it handed some of the development duties to *ModNation Racers* and *Sleeping Dogs* developer United Front Games. There's no confirmation on how much of the production the studio undertook, but it's reassuring that Square Enix handed the project to the talented team.

Tomb Raider: Definitive Edition *arrives on PlayStation 4 and Xbox One on 31 January.*

> "The team didn't simply up-res the game, they pulled it apart and rebuilt it with obsessive detail"
> Crystal Dynamics, press release

COMPETITION

games™ Reader Survey

Win A Bag of Awesome with Insert Coin Clothing

→ To enter, take the **games™** Reader Survey at gamestm.co.uk/survey

Disappointed with your gift haul over the Christmas holidays? Well **games™** has partnered up with Insert Coin Clothing to give away a Bag Of Awesome worth over £100 to one lucky reader. Inside you'll find a delectable selection of clothing items emblazoned with gaming iconography that will, without fail, transform your wardrobe from the doldrums of social conformity into the very definition of geek chic.

Insert Coin Clothing is the one-stop shop for all clothing gaming related, from a letterman jacket adorned with *Hotline Miami*'s iconic imagery, to a fashionable flannel number inspired by *The Last Of Us*' Joel – every item is designed with subtle influence for the fashion-conscious gaming advocate.

To be in with a chance at winning Insert Coin Clothing's Bag Of Awesome, simply head online to gamestm.co.uk/survey and fill out the simple Reader Survey. The competition closes 20 March 2014.

Find out more at:
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WHY I ❤…

Sonic The Hedgehog

ADAM 'ATOMIC' SALTSMAN, CREATOR OF CANABALT

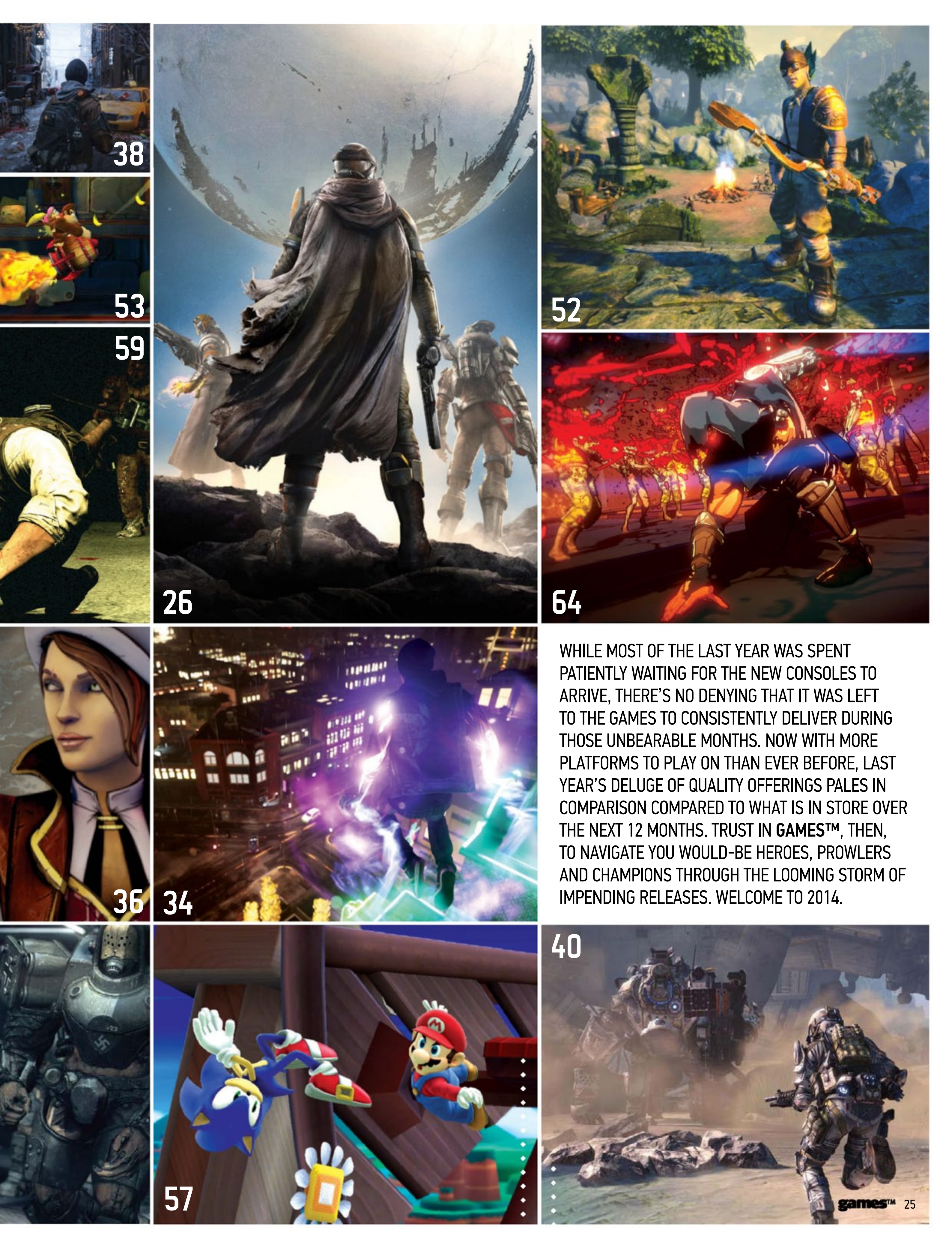
"*It is impossible for me to untangle Sega's first* Sonic *game from growing up, my imagination, what I think about games now, and just pure happiness. At the time it was a technical marvel, and it remains a work of considerable audio-visual beauty, an anti-*Mario *in only the very best ways. Marvelling over* Sonic's *design, even as a middle school student, inspired me to fill reams of notebooks with imagined level designs and character designs, all the things that I do as my full-time job now.* Sonic *directly contributed to the existence of* Canabalt *too, of course, which had an enormous impact on my life. That cartridge wasn't my first love, nor my greatest love, but the craftsmanship and artistry it represents, and the influence it has had over me as a designer, the way it serves as a reference or point of comparison for so much of what I love about videogames, all these things put it on a special pedestal for me. So thanks,* Sonic."



"Sonic's design inspired me to fill reams of notebooks with imagined level designs and character designs"

ADAM 'ATOMIC' SALTSMAN, CREATOR OF CANABALT


INSIDE TOMORROW'S MOST IMPORTANT GAMES
GAME CHANGERS
MAD MAX
DYING LIGHT
WOLFENSTEIN
MIRROR'S EDGE
THE CREW
CASTLEVANIA: LORDS OF SHADOW 2
THE ELDER SCROLLS ONLINE
DRIVECLUB
YAIBA: NINJA GAIDEN Z
THIEF
WATCH DOGS
THE WITNESS
FABLE LEGENDS
SMASH BROS FOR WII U
DESTINY
FALLOUT 4
THE ORDER 1886
CASTLEVANIA: LORDS OF SHADOW 2
WATCH DOGS
THE CREW
TITANFALL
INFAMOUS: SECOND SON
SMASH BROS FOR WII U
THE WITNESS
MARIO KART 8
DRAGON AGE INQUISITION
STRIDER
SMASH BROS FOR WII U
THE ORDER 1886
MAD MAX
58
63
68
61
49
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54



WHILE MOST OF THE LAST YEAR WAS SPENT PATIENTLY WAITING FOR THE NEW CONSOLES TO ARRIVE, THERE'S NO DENYING THAT IT WAS LEFT TO THE GAMES TO CONSISTENTLY DELIVER DURING THOSE UNBEARABLE MONTHS. NOW WITH MORE PLATFORMS TO PLAY ON THAN EVER BEFORE, LAST YEAR'S DELUGE OF QUALITY OFFERINGS PALES IN COMPARISON COMPARED TO WHAT IS IN STORE OVER THE NEXT 12 MONTHS. TRUST IN **GAMES™**, THEN, TO NAVIGATE YOU WOULD-BE HEROES, PROWLERS AND CHAMPIONS THROUGH THE LOOMING STORM OF IMPENDING RELEASES. WELCOME TO 2014.



DESTINY
A SPACE ODYSSEY

DESTINY MARKS BUNGIE'S FIRST ORIGINAL IP SINCE IT LAUNCHED HALO OVER A DECADE AGO. COMMUNITY MANAGER DAVID DAGUE DISCUSSES THE DEVELOPER'S AMBITIOUS NEW VENTURE

Format: RPG FPS **Publisher:** Activision **Developer:** Bungie **Release date:** 9 September

FOR ONCE IN THE ALMIGHTY HISTORY OF ANALYTICAL INTERNET HYSTERIA, SOMEONE FORGOT TO PAY ATTENTION. In the two years that had passed since *Halo 3* hoovered up every worldwide sales record going, thousands of armchair Spartans were getting soft, growing anxious for their next tour of duty. Bungie was promptly charged with ramping up development on its premiere franchise, finding itself caught in an interminable production cycle that demanded a new *Halo* release on almost an annual basis.

Halo: ODST was the result, an adequate stopgap that offered an account of previous events that tied players over until the arrival of *Halo: Reach* a year later. But tucked away among its alternative perspective of the *Halo* lore was a poster, one that suggests that Bungie sought to stretch itself outside the world it had created for quite some time before it waved goodbye to Master Chief. 'Destiny Awaits' read the nondescript image; illustrated with the now familiar ominous white sphere orbiting our own planet's surface.

> "WE WANTED TO CREATE A PLACE THAT WOULD FEEL AS REAL TO THE PLAYER AS THEIR OWN BACKYARD"

"It began with an idea," says David Dague (aka Deej) Bungie's community manager and current company mouthpiece. "With *Destiny*, we wanted to create a place that would feel as real to the player as their own backyard, only far »



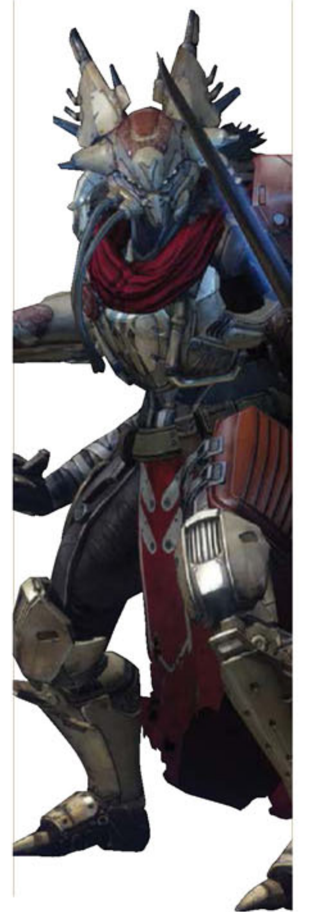
Each of *Destiny*'s planets and locations will have its own range of enemies and monsters to battle.

more fun to explore. We wanted to fill that world with mystery and action, and make it feel alive. Jason Jones [Bungie co-founder and design director] said it best: the only limitation to our ambition is our imagination. Creating the world of *Destiny* from a blank canvas has been a freeing experience."

Although, describing *Destiny* as a 'world' is something of a misnomer, given that Bungie has explored the depths of our Solar System as a setting for its new science-fiction epic. Set seven hundred years into the future, humanity has been all but wiped out after attempting to colonise neighbouring planets and moons, with hostile alien forces hunting the remnants of our kind. Kept alive by a mysterious white celestial body known as The Traveler above Earth, now the last defenders of the human race must fight back against the extra-terrestrial marauders.

As back-of-the-box synopses go, it's hardly a snappy case of 'Rescue the princess'. But it's been made pretty clear by now that *Destiny* is less about Bungie's own idea of narrative being enforced on the player, instead liberating the world it has created and those that occupy it from the constraints of weaving a conventional story over series of linear stages. Without volumes of pre-conceived notions, the studio has the chance to surprise players again and twist conventional storytelling to create something truly original and where the end is completely unknown.

"We've chosen epic goals that would really challenge us," reveals Dague as he guides **games™** through the process of planetscaping – building a new world steeped in history and unique in character. "In crafting the imagery that would shape this new world, our artists have had a lot of fun with elements of science fiction and fantasy. The Tower is a great example of this. The Guardians are more reminiscent of knights than soldiers, overlooking their last safe city from the ramparts of a mighty fortress. With the Traveler hovering mysteriously over the City, we open up a whole series of epic questions for the player to chase across the solar system. Realising these visions is a true team effort. Environment artists work with concept artists every step of the way. The spaces we're creating with our next gen development tools all follow a grand vision of what we call 'Mythic Science Fiction' – where humanity's finest moments have become reclaimed by the wild."



BUT BEFORE HUMANITY'S DOWNFALL, OUR EXPANSION INTO THE STARS BECAME A QUEST TO RESHAPE DISTANT PLANETS INTO HOSPITABLE NEW HOMEWORLDS. Similarly, Bungie seized the opportunity to explore the fertile idea of reimagining neighbouring planets as inventive sci-fi backdrops, crafting environments both novel and tangible. And while only a handful have been revealed to date, *Destiny*'s universe encompasses all the Solar System's planets, moons, asteroids and other landmarks drifting above Earth.

"Playing within our own solar system has been a ton of fun," enthuses Dague. "We have a number of destinations that should be relatable to players that we can pack with surprises. As much as we've seen of the surface of Mars, or Venus, or the Moon, we've never seen it colonised. One of the major themes of *Destiny* will be exploring the ruins of a lost civilisation long after its Golden Age. With new world-building tools in hand, our environment artists are on their own journeys to realise those spaces. They're able to work faster than ever before, building the largest worlds we've ever opened up to the player. The interesting challenge has been to create places that were shattered during a tragic event, all the while retaining the hopefulness of a tale of redemption."

It's the idea of embodying the ultimate galactic adventurer that excites most, with players handed a simple mission and given a vast ocean of stars to explore with thousands of other intrepid pioneers. Becoming a Guardian (the name given to the surviving Earthlings fighting back) requires distinguishing your own avatar using an impressive suite of comprehensive customisation tools, while the addition of multiple characters slots enables players to juggle multiple play styles without sacrificing progress.



MASTER CLASS

■ Your guide to the playable classes in Destiny

So far, three playable classes have been confirmed for *Destiny*'s release; the Hunter, the Titan and the Warlock. Each will offer up different appearances, skill sets and weapon affinities – though Bungie has explicitly stated that each class will be balanced and none will be better or worse than another.

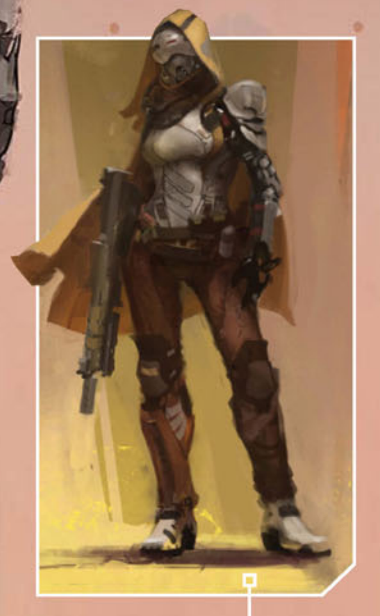
THE TITAN

■ The mandatory 'heavies', Titans are known for their proud heritage – the first Titans built the wall that protects humanity's last city and gave their lives to protect it. Similar to *Halo*'s Spartans, Titans are covered head-to-foot in heavy armour – every inch the traditional sci-fi space marine. Gameplay footage has seen a Titan double jump, and unleash an area effect ability called 'Fist of Havoc' that throws back surrounding enemies.



THE WARLOCK

■ Years of studying the enigmatic Traveler has allowed the Warlock to siphon off some of its power, granting them abilities similar to magic. With flowing overcoats and an emphasis on the arcane, the Warlock is reminiscent of *Star Wars*' Jedis. Rather than the Force, though, Warlocks can harness the power of the sun for thrown solar flare incendiaries, mess around with gravity to achieve gliding abilities and create nova-powered missiles out of thin air.



THE HUNTER

■ Hunters were once vagabonds – lone wolf types that stalked around the various wastelands of the galaxy, plundering for their own end. Hunters are the scouts of *Destiny*'s universe and have a tendency to break away from the pack and sniff out hostiles under the protection of nothing but their own stealth. With hooded cloaks, light armour and an ability that allows them to supercharge their chosen weapon, Hunters make lethal snipers but can also punish at close range handguns and their unique Hunter Knives.

» There are three different races to choose from, but it's worth mentioning that your face is only seen in the social spaces outside of combat where you can roam without the need of a helmet. Humans are the underdogs of *Destiny*, the fragile race striving to regain a semblance of civilisation once again after an event known as the Collapse eradicated all but a small pocket of humankind. The Awoken similarly survived the Collapse, but remain withdrawn – almost an ethereal presence among the Solar System. And finally, the Exo are a force of robots created by humans during what's described as a 'Golden Age', where humankind's technological advancement reached its plateau.

"*Destiny* is new for us in that every player will find themselves at the centre of their own story," explains Dague. "The main character in this game will be the one that you create. That Guardian will be propelled through a narrative of cinematic moments that will reveal the secrets of this mysterious world we've built for you to explore."

Yet, Bungie is keen to explain that the core experience of *Destiny* won't feel too dissimilar to what fans of the studio have grown to love, as Dague explains: "We cast you in the role of the hero," he says. "We throw you into desperate situations where you'll battle against overwhelming odds. We give you something meaningful to protect from enemies that are fun to fight. [In that respect] players who have enjoyed the stories of previous games will find a number of similar themes in *Destiny.* At the same time, the stories that we're most excited about are the ones that players will write together, as their Guardians collide at the crossroads of their respective journeys, and team up to work together in a public event."

FOR EVERYTHING THAT DESTINY PROMISES TO BE, AT ITS CORE IT DELIVERS ON THE TIGHT, RESPONSIVE FIRST-PERSON SHOOTER EXPERIENCE THAT GAINED THE STUDIO A FOOTHOLD IN BIG BUDGET DEVELOPMENT. There's an unmistakable sense of history that permeates its gameplay, the legacy of *Halo* stamped across its brawny arsenal and rapid combat.

While *Destiny* carries the principles of what makes an engaging shooter over to a much larger playing field, Bungie hasn't just created an army of Master Chiefs with trimmed-down breastplates. The studio views the projects as its chance to "evolve [its] brand of action shooter" and create a unifying experience that hinges on the interaction between players.

We ask whether, by removing the current barriers between single and multiplayer gaming, this creates certain storytelling and community hurdles to overcome compared to a more traditional first-person shooter campaign. "These aren't challenges as much as opportunities," answers Dague promptly. "In many ways, this is the game that Bungie has always wanted to make. We believe that anything that's fun to do is more fun to do with your friends, and we have seen amazing community interactions in previous Bungie games to prove it. With *Destiny,* we're taking those social phenomena and we're making them central to the overall experience."

The key is having events and objectives simply too colossal to overcome by one Guardian alone. It's the same social incentive that MMO raids thrive on (although Bungie doesn't consider *Destiny* part of that genre), the idea that it takes an assortment of uniquely-honed classes to gain the necessary tactical advantage to overcome the game's most testing battle scenarios.

The class choice is between Titan, Warlock and Hunter, but this doesn't define the way you play as much as your chosen Focus does. Each Guardian bears a class-specific focus, which has its own skill tree that offers branching abilities, weapons types and perks. There will be multiple focuses to acquire within each class that have 20 upgradeable levels, the key difference from a

FIELD OF ACTIVISION

■ After Bungie left the *Halo* franchise in the capable hands of 343 Industries, the developer took a departure from publishers Microsoft in order to produce a multi-format game. Landing with Activision, Bungie ended up signing a contract for four *Destiny* games, supposedly launching across the lifespan of this generation. We were concerned that this would see some cannibalisation within Activision's IP, but since *Destiny* was announced and gameplay elements expanded upon, it's clear that *Destiny* will stand out among Activision's many properties, likely not threatening *Titanfall* or *Call Of Duty*'s market shares. Reflecting on Activision's past records, though, we're cautious of in-game premium content becoming a big part of the franchise; something we never saw in *Halo*, and something we *really* don't want to see in *Destiny.*







Bungie has cited Eighties cartoons as an influence in regards to creating otherworldly creature design.



traditional class system being that you can swap it out like a weapon in any given situation. Effectively, you could have a range of focuses that are tailored for specific gameplay situations and just switch to the one best suited for your circumstances.

Shooting is always at the core of the gameplay experience regardless of your chosen class, so while Warlocks might be equipped with a range of spells and magical attacks, it doesn't preclude them from cutting through enemies using a trusty rifle. Of course, each of the classes still fill a specific role: Warlocks are support-type characters that can choose to focus on healing and supplying buffs to allies. Titans are the heavies that deal heavy damage at close range and can withstand a beating. While Hunter falls somewhere in the middle, packing mystical firepower and mix skilful abilities with powerful damage dealing. This is just the beginning. Throughout your time exploring the secrets of space you'll discover armour and weapons that further bolster the effectiveness of your chosen class and focus. You complete your loadout with a few essential items: your AI ghost companion that can solve practical problems, such as illuminating dark environments; there's also a personal land vehicle and your own spaceship – the latter on display to other players before jumping into multiplayer matches.

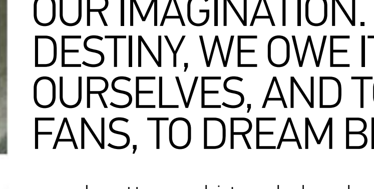
One idea that carries through all of the items, equipment and vehicles in *Destiny* is a sense of identity. The majority of loot discovered will have a backstory and mythic quality to it, so you'll often be able to identify another player's skill level just on the weaponry and armour they have accumulated. However, Dague makes it clear that, while it's inevitable that players will have their preferences, there will be plenty of reasons to experiment with other types of equipment. "Will players have a favourite gun? We certainly hope so," Dague cheerfully muses.

"That doesn't mean that we won't make that a hard decision for them to make. We want players to explore many different ways to defeat their enemies and complete their missions. This goes well beyond a broad range of options for customising and upgrading a vast arsenal of weapons. As Guardians progress along the path of their adventure, they'll also gain new armour and gear that will change the way they look and fight. New abilities will enhance their combat style and change the way they approach every engagement. Our goal is not to encourage players to stick with one set of weapons, but to lure them out of their comfort zones to experience the action of *Destiny* in new and exciting ways. That experience should always be evolving."

WHILE HUMANITY HAS ITS ODDS OF SURVIVAL SIGNIFICANTLY INCREASED WITH ITS BOLSTERED ARRAY OF WEAPONRY, Bungie has equally concentrated on evolving the way AI behaves within a persistent open-world against multiple player characters.

"In *Destiny*, our focus has shifted to enemies that work together more closely to send you retreating into orbit," teases Dague. "Wise Guardians will attack in fire teams. The combatants that they face should have some shared tactics of their own. Breeding some

> "THE ONLY LIMITATION TO OUR AMBITION IS OUR IMAGINATION. WITH DESTINY, WE OWE IT TO OURSELVES, AND TO OUR FANS, TO DREAM BIG"



more elegant teamwork into our bad guys has been fun for us, and surprising for playtesters. With every Bungie game, the aliens that you battle for survival are a crucial ingredient. You spend most of your experience focused on them. Every little victory should crackle with satisfaction – every Fallen Captain whose soul escapes his body, or every Vex that spills their guts.

"The alien races that you'll fight in *Destiny* aren't just cannon fodder," Dague adds. "They're characters in this tale. Each of them has their own motivations for taking up residence on our homeworlds. They all fight (and die) in surprising ways. Their personalities and their cultures permeate every decision we make, including animation, sound effects, weapon design, language, and architecture."

Exploration to meet these central foes is a key facet of *Destiny* that Bungie hopes that players will enjoy together, forming the aforementioned fire teams (a squad of up to three friends) to play through the story. There will also be public areas that house large-scale battles – such as the one seen in the E3 demo that featured one of the Fallen's (*Destiny*'s savage race of space pirates) tank mechs battling several players beneath a monolithic wall in Old Russia – but the number of players in these arenas will be limited to correspond with the challenge at hand. Impressively, *Destiny* runs on just one server, so that players all share the same world and matchmaking is done in the background seamlessly on the fly.

Ultimately, it's the player's decision whether they wish to interact with other Guardians roaming the vast universe, choosing if they wish to embark on the campaign alone and ignore public boss battles and other scenarios outfitted for social interaction. Bungie wants everyone to enjoy the story, no matter how they choose to play the game. "Players of *Destiny* should expect an engaging story with a satisfying resolution," says Dague. "We're including the »

OUT OF THE SILENT PLANET

THE WORLDS YOU'LL EXPLORE DURING YOUR TIME IN DESTINY

Bungie is adept at knitting together expansive and fantastic mythologies that expand beyond planets and solar systems, fusing history and scale. *Destiny* looks to be no different – as a Guardian, you'll be shipping off to the celestial outreaches of our solar system in search of loot and weapons in a universe that promises to be as intricate and detailed as anything you'd see in the most epic of science fiction stories.



VENUS

■ Wrapped in a veil of fog, Venus was once the domain of humanity's most ambitious scientific research programmes. Since retreating back under the protection of the Traveler, settlements across the galaxy have fallen apart, victim to their native planet's rampant ecosystems. Inhabited by the robotic Vex race –who seem to guard their citadel tower with zealous fanaticism – Venus has become a planet ruled by its oceans and jungles, both of which encroach ever further on humanity's structures.



THE TOWER

■ It's no secret that *Destiny* has some significant medieval/Knights of the Templar influences in its design. Never is this clearer than in the home base – The Tower. This soaring monolith will act as a home base for the travel weary Guardians who can come here to barter with vendors, collect quest rewards and meet other players to organise expeditions with. Each of the three classes has an exclusive area that offers character-specific options, creating a sense of community and brotherhood among the clans.



MARS

■ The red planet once hosted a vibrant and bustling metropolis, reminiscent of the towering skylines of New York. As the red sands built up and maintenance of the city ceased, the settlement began to drown under the weight of the dunes. Only the crowning floors of the skyscrapers are visible now, and are these entry points lead the way to the claustrophobic depths that the Cabal race have made their home.

OLD RUSSIA

■ It's not always the most far flung reaches of space that offer the most exotic and intriguing locations – right here on the homefront is 'Old Russia'. Based on the real-world Russian space programme's launch site (which is actually located in Kazakhstan), Old Russia resounds with an uneasy feeling of past glories – towering architecture and gutted colonial spacecraft lie in ruins among the dried-out, dying flora of the old steppe and the place is riddled with the Fallen (who have an affinity for the dank interiors of the structural husks).

THE MOON

■ Initially teased in an atmospheric and impressive trailer, the Moon has been burrowed into by the Hive who have since begun opening up a gaping chasm that leads right to the Moon's core. Substantial parts of the Moon's crust have begun to flake off and drift into outer space as the Hive dig their nest deeper and deeper into the lunar core. An expansive network of connected human settlements now lie dormant on the surface, the lunar dust slowly covering what's left of the shattered community's makeshift graveyard.





The Fallen are one of *Destiny*'s primary villains, roaming the galaxy to destroy the remnants of humanity.

largest story we've ever told in a package that will compel them to experience this world again and again. We'll send them back to their favourite destinations again and again, and send them through on different vectors. While there will be open environments to explore, they will be scored with roads that lead players into the action."

IT'S CLEAR THEN THAT BUNGIE DIDN'T WANT ITS LEGION OF *HALO* FANS TO FEEL ALIENATED BY ITS NEW WORLD. Responsive action gameplay underlines everything in *Destiny*, and the satisfaction of unloading a few rounds from your pulse rifle before jumping on a vehicle and speeding off into the distance has not been lost in the studio's relocation to a bigger showground.

Unsurprisingly, competitive multiplayer is an essential component of the game. Even within a persistent online world, PvP is seamless mixed into the equation with much the same creative flair that distinguished *Halo* as one of the most revered multiplayer shooters of all time. It seems at odds with the fiction that what few humans remain would create factions within the City and fight over prime spots of galactic turf, but this civil tension enables players to dive into a range of competitive multiplayer modes without leaving the single-player experience.

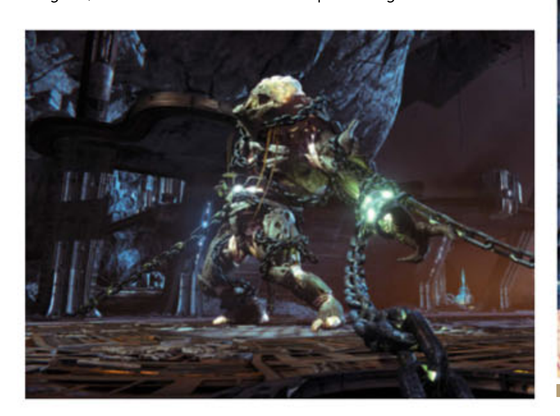
"Competitive multiplayer is just one (very important) activity in this living, social world," says Dague. "There's something for your every mood in this game. Like the casual, social, and exploratory modes of *Destiny*, the competitive application places an emphasis on teamwork. Everything is designed from the ground up to bring people together. Sometimes they'll be on the same team. On very specific occasions, they won't! As much as we're intrigued that the players of our game will have chance encounters as a unified force for good, we know all too well from our previous games that the urge to compete against each other will be strong. We love those elements of gaming, and we're devoting a lot of effort to satisfying the competitive instinct in *Destiny*. Already, our designers are battling each other for bragging rights in a weekly tournament, so it sounds like they're onto something."

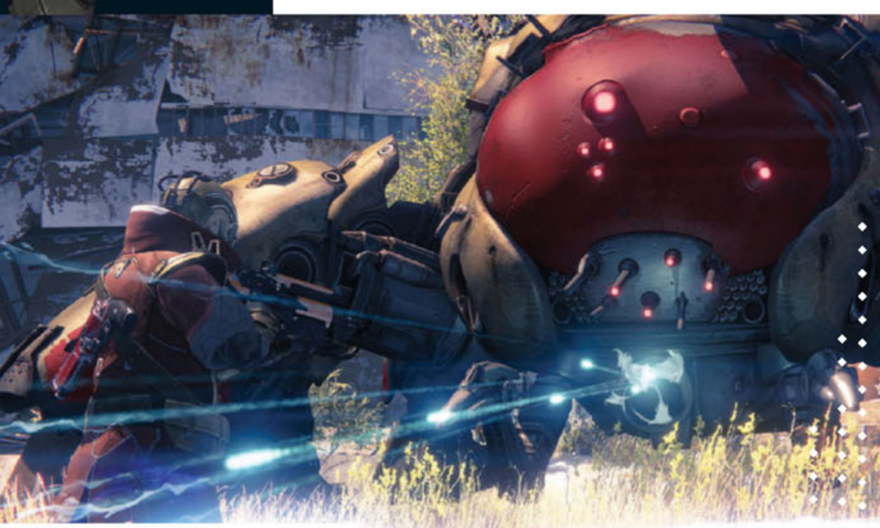
Progression through the story and multiplayer will work in tandem, with players able to carry across their awards from both types of play. "One very exciting aspect of competitive multiplayer is that Guardians will use the same rewards they earned in defeating alien invaders to battle each other," continues Dague on the subject. "Your character in *Destiny* is persistent across the entire experience. There will be no stock loadout. Players who specialise in different activities will come together to figure out who is the most dangerous Guardian in the City. Since each activity offers unique rewards, we can look forward to heated battles between connoisseurs of different modes."

Destiny is a colossal undertaking for Bungie but also for the players that'll join its world in September. The focus is on delivering a cinematic story with a defined end, but when and where that conclusion comes is still very much a mystery. The studio has confirmed that it plans to support the game post-release with a wealth of additional content, further feeding into the freeform structure that allows Guardians to embark on an activity, event or mission that suits their mood at any one time. It's a world that has the potential to refresh itself endlessly; coaxing players into returning to areas of the universe previously visited.

While Bungie rightfully refuses to categorise *Destiny* as an MMO, it's clearly learnt valuable lessons from the genre in regard to constructing long-haul game design and meaningful multiplayer interaction. Matched with a compelling storyline, what you have is a game that simply defies categorisation, a truly next-gen experience on all frontiers.

As recent triple-A titles have taught us, such unbridled ambition can be susceptible to technical problems – such things are never clear until the game final reaches shelves. But *Destiny* clearly demonstrates a developer's creative impulses being allowed to flourish, an approach that will only help to further innovate an industry (particularly in the blockbuster arena) stagnating on cut-and-paste sequel design. Here's a studio finally cut from the ties of its heritage and allowed to venture forth into unknown territory. Destiny awaits all of us.




There's an astounding scale to *Destiny*'s boss battles.



INFAMOUS: SECOND SON

HOLDING OUT FOR A HERO

Format: Open-world adventure **Publisher:** Sony **Developer:** Sucker Punch **Release date:** 21 March

ANYONE HOLDING ONTO the hope that Sucker Punch may have cured *InFamous*' crippling personality deficiency may want to think again. Cole MacGrath was a black hole of charisma, one that blipped out of being amidst an otherwise explosive conclusion climax during *InFamous 2* finale, and while he'll be replaced in the sequel *Second Son*, the PlayStation 4 exclusive won't offer much respite from intolerable characters.

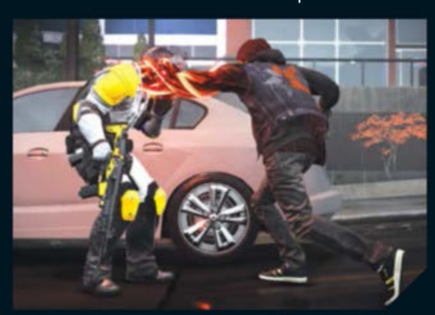
Destructively arrogant and impetuous to the point that he'd probably level a city if he misplaced his favourite beanie, Delsin Rowe comes across as a protagonist pieced together by a committee whose research wholly consisted of watching a two-minute recap of *Misfits* and gazing through the window at Topshop for several hours. There's a chance that this is intentional on Sucker Punch's part. After all, gaining superhuman abilities is likely to go to anyone's head and Rowe's journey involves pilfering the abilities of other Conduits, gradually building himself up into an unstoppable force in his journey to fight back against the oppression super-powered citizens like himself face. It could just be that this directionless twenty-something hipster is heading towards an almighty fall.

While Cole MacGrath's parkour abilities will be transferred to Rowe in the sequel, the rebellious young superhero will have more ways of navigating rooftops than simply scrambling between bricks and ledges. Rowe's first ability manifests itself in the form of Smoke, enabling him to unleash powerful fire-based attacks, but also transport himself through the air in a puff of ash. So when climbing up the side of a building, a conveniently-placed vent offers a shortcut for Rowe to quickly scale the structure.

Rowe then is a more streamlined edition of the original hero, possessing a greater fluidity to movements and a more powerful array of abilities at his fingertips – not that Sucker Punch is quite ready to reveal the full suite of powers that Rowe will eventually unlock. Even combat feels fresher, projectile attacks



It appears that both the Smoke and Neon abilities have some sort of special attack in the form of a ground pound, unleashing a concentrated force that can take out multiple enemies.



It'll be interesting to see whether any of the other abilities available will revolve less around physical combat.

BEST OF THE REST OTHER GAMES TO KEEP AN EYE ON IN 2014

MONOLITH SOFTWARE'S 'X'



The tentatively titled '*X*' is a Wii U exclusive, widely believed to be a part of the *Xeno* series, and will be an open-world exploration game featuring huge mechs the game calls 'Dolls'. Precious little is known about the title, other than it looks beautiful and will be an injection of JRPG glory that the Wii U desperately needs.

RAYMAN LEGENDS



Late February will see the launch of Ubisoft's 2D platformer on next-gen consoles, and for some bizarre reason it will feature a Snoop Dogg (sorry, Snoop *Lion*) skin for *Rayman*. PS4 users will get to play as Assassin Ray while Xbox One users get Ray Vaas and Splinter Ray. We expect the 1080p UbiArt Framework to look stunning.

CASTLEVANIA: LORDS OF SHADOW 2



We have a lot of respect for MercurySteam – who has explicitly stated that the *Lords Of Shadow* sequel won't be making an appearance on next-gen because the series started on the 360/PS3, and therefore it's only apt the series will end there, too.

INSIGHT

INFAMOUS: SECOND SON

Delsin Rowe is voiced by voice/mo-cap artist Troy Baker, who recently played Booker DeWitt in *BioShock Infinite*, The Joker in *Batman: Arkham Origins* and Joel in *The Last Of Us*.

sailing towards their target without the need of manual aiming, reinforcing *Second Son*'s emphasis on momentum and resolving one of *InFamous*' more clunky gameplay mechanics in the process.

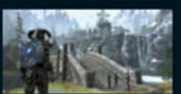
It'll be interesting to see how many of Rowe's powers will pivot around the concept of speed. The only other superhuman talent revealed to date is Neon – one that is stolen from a Conduit named Fetch. The main ability that this unlocks is a neon dash, which enables the player to burst into a stream of bright particles and navigate through the streets of Seattle at breakneck speeds. There will be some combat enhancements with the Neon upgrade, but where the Smoke power is used in conjunction with Rowe's signature chain weapon, Neon is based on range attacks. It's here that Sucker Punch has made an effort to establish various strengths and weaknesses to each power. "If you want to get your hands dirty, Smoke is great," lead designer Jaime Griesemer posted on the PlayStation blog last year. "But Neon is clean and streamlined. You're basically firing lasers out of your hands, so you're a natural sniper. With Neon, combat is all about precision from a distance. Each shot hits hard, especially if you are targeting the enemy's weak points. Neon lets you dissect a squad of Dupes [the in-game term for the DUP enforcement officers] like a glowing purple surgeon."

> "IF YOU RUN OUT OF SMOKE, DESTROY A NEARBY CAR AND ABSORB THE CLOUD"

It's also crucial for players to recharge their abilities at regular intervals by utilising the environment. If you run out of Smoke, simply destroy a nearby car and absorb the thick cloud emanating from its carcass. Neon, however, can be gained through the bright lights of the city itself. Given the reliance on acquiring more power through the world around the player, we'd make an educated guess and assume other powers will be based on easily accessible resources such as water, earth and, perhaps, chocolate. There are a wealth of options for Sucker Punch to explore.

So with great power comes more responsibility than any irritating upstart deserves the right to have. Delson Rowe will be endowed with a swathe of hugely empowering abilities through the course of the game, an honour that should make him the perfect malleable shell in which an individual's play style can impose a character. That could still happen – to date Sucker Punch has equally prioritised showcasing the narrative strengths as well as gameplay – but our fear is that the studio has introduced a character with such an overbearing personality that it'll drain all enthusiasm we have for investing in the narrative. We can't wait to see what other tricks *Second Son* has up its sleeve, but we've yet to warm up to the idea of another arrogant hipster saving the world.

THE ELDER SCROLLS ONLINE



An MMO that will launch on the PC and hit Xbox One/PS4 two months later, *The Elder Scrolls Online* will run on a monthly subscription fee with elements of a premium content model in there, too. By launch, the game will have been in development for six years – surely enough time to create a cohesive, working *TES* MMO.

DARK SOULS II



From Software's difficult but addictive sequel will apparently be twice the size of the original *Dark Souls*, featuring a less intense learning curve for new players. Where previous games could be exploited by learning specific formulaic tactics for enemies, *Dark Souls II* will feature more intelligent AI… you've been warned.

ULTRA STREET FIGHTER IV



By adding five new characters into the game, the new *Ultra* expansion will bring *Street Fighter IV*'s roster to a massive 44 fighters, with the update completely rebalancing the gameplay in response to fan feedback. Considering the late release date of the game (June 2014), we'd put good money on a next-gen announcement soon.

TALES FROM THE BORDERLANDS

A BEAUTIFUL, UNEXPECTED PARTNERSHIP

Format: TBA **Publisher:** Telltale Games **Developer:** In-house **Release date:** TBA

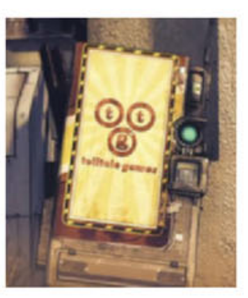
NOW, WE'VE SEEN Telltale do *The Walking Dead*, and we've seen it do *Fables: The Wolf Among Us*. Both have a spattering of Western film heritage about them, and both have the potential to make stunning Clint Eastwood inspired tales of retribution and vengeance. Luckily, Telltale doesn't need to risk those solid franchises in a Western gambit now, because it's got the *Borderlands* intellectual property to play with. Precious little is known about this game at the minute, but that isn't going to stop us from speculating about what could happen within the dusty wilderness that is Pandora – we think, actually we *know* there are going to be guns. Lots of guns. It wouldn't be *Borderlands* without armaments by the bucketload. There'll be sass, too, and satire, along with ridiculous humour, retro-fitted sci-fi, charismatic villains, one-line action-dialogue spewing heroes and – of course – Claptrap. (You can never have enough Claptrap).

> "THE GEARBOX/TELLTALE MASHUP IS A CURIOUS ONE, WE DON'T THINK ANYONE WAS EXPECTING IT"

The Gearbox/Telltale mash-up is a curious one – we don't think anyone was expecting the announcement at last year's VGX show. But we're not complaining – with Gearbox on hand to consult on the games, and with the idea apparently put forward by the developer in the first place, we know the series is in good hands. The game will amalgamate old and new – ushering new characters into *Borderlands* lore while revisiting old fan favourites (weapon dealer and everybody's best friend Marcus is already confirmed, alongside the caustically charming megalomaniac villain Handsome Jack).

In a twist for the series, you won't be playing as Vault Hunters, but rather as some other, unknown characters. Are we going to see things from the perspective of some of Pandora's bandits, or are we going to maybe see some characters working under Handsome Jack? We assume the game is going to follow canon, but whether it'll take place before or after the demise of *Borderlands 2*'s disfigured villain is still uncertain. We're holding out for a tale of two grifters, conning their way through the other, less practiced con artists on the planet, held together in a hectic Spaghetti Western framework.

Aside from *Fables: The Wolf Among Us*, there seems to be a trait with Telltale games – they tie into the other media releases within their respective franchises. Both



We think the *Borderlands* universe is a great fit for the creative company.



Could this poster be a giveaway as to what we can expect of the story? Are we going to see a *Firefly*-esque criminal on the run?







INSIGHT

Tales From The Borderlands isn't the first spin-off of Gearbox's franchise: mini-RPG *Borderlands Legends* released on iOS devices to coincide with the release of *Borderlands 2*.

TALES FROM THE BORDERLANDS



INSIGHT

This isn't the first game based on HBO's *Game Of Thrones* series: Cyanide Studio's created 2012's RPG that was brimming with ambition but ultimately failed to deliver.

GAME OF THRONES

Format: TBA
Publisher: Telltale Games
Developer: In-house
Release date: TBA

GAME OF THRONES

THE NIGHT IS DARK AND FULL OF TERRORS

the *Walking Dead* and *Game of Thrones* titles are being made to tie into the TV shows – that leads us to think that perhaps Gearbox is getting *Borderlands 3* ready to be announced; *Tales From The Borderlands* is pegged for a 2014 release, and if the series is in keeping with Telltale's cross-release philosophy, we could perhaps find ourselves raiding vaults properly sooner than we'd expected.

While there's no word on which platforms *Tales From The Borderlands* will release on, we're fairly certain we'll at least see the game on Xbox One, Xbox 360, PS3 and PS4, with mobile and tablet iterations coming a little later. We're also considering the possibility of a Vita-only release – it would make sense, considering the imminent rerelease of *Borderlands 2* for Sony's handheld console. If that is the case, it would make 2014 a strong year for the Vita. We've just got to wait and see, though.

IN A PREVIOUS issue of **games™** we slyly likened Telltale Games' unflinching willingness to dispatch its central characters to that of *A Game Of Thrones'* author George R.R. Martin's. And like a red comet burning brightly across the clear skies of Westeros, we weren't the only ones to take notice of the brutal thematic comparison. "Working with HBO to develop a new game series based on *Game Of Thrones* is a natural fit for our studio," Dan Connors, co-founder and CEO of Telltale Games said in a statement following the announcement. "This partnership will create an experience that will captivate the huge, global *Game Of Thrones* audience. It will put them in control of the epic stories of warfare, intrigue, violence and revenge that we know and love."

It's a busy time for the studio who already has three projects in active development (*The Wolf Among Us*, *The Walking Dead: Season Two* and *Tales From The Borderlands*), with the five-part videogame adaptation of the popular HBO television show arriving in 2014 following the completion of the three aforementioned projects.

So what can we expect from Telltale's take on the Seven Kingdoms? Well, given that it's licensed on the HBO show rather than the novels it's based on, we suspect it'll be woven into the events of one of the existing three series rather than adhering to the slightly different plotting of the original tomes. It's not Telltale's house style to use pre-existing characters as protagonists, so we can expect new creations to offer a unique perspective of the dangers that await the duplicitous schemers that blight every corner of the vast continent.

What will prove more difficult is integrating popular characters and locations into the central narrative, given how they're stretched across several regions separated by hundreds of miles. It's hard to imagine that any authentic take on the fiction wouldn't feature both King's Landing and The Wall prominently, which would lead us to believe that Telltale will tackle multiple player-characters (something that the studio played with recently with *The Walking Dead* DLC *400 Days*), positioned in vital landmarks across Westeros.

And when it comes to characters, any high-profile adaptation of *Game Of Thrones* worth its salted pork (sorry Cyanide) needs to feature the delightfully debauched Tyrion Lannister, the slimy puppet master Littlefinger and at least one member of the disbanded Stark clan. Cameo appearances are all but guaranteed. But even without such fan service, the prospect of Telltale lending its storytelling prowess to Martin's work so vividly encapsulated by the HBO show is a hugely exciting one. Telltale is always at its best when towing the morally grey line and subjecting players to the horrific ramifications of choices they've made, and there's no world more filled with moral ambiguity than Westeros.

> "A NEW GAME SERIES BASED ON GAME OF THRONES IS A NATURAL FIT FOR OUR STUDIO"

TAKE YOUR TABLETS

THE DIVISION

Not on Xbox One or PS4? Don't worry – you'll be able to play with friends who are via the mobile app, which lets you take control of support UAVs.

Graphically, *The Division* is insane. *This* is what you bought a new console for, and you shall have it soon enough.

TOM CLANCY'S THE DIVISION

WHAT, YOU WERE HOPING FOR HAWX 3?

Format: PlayStation 4, Xbox One **Publisher:** Ubisoft **Developer:** Ubisoft Massive **Release date:** Q4

WITH 'NEXT-GEN' BECOMING 'this gen' now that all three major players have their shiny new consoles out, it suddenly seems that much harder to describe the lofty ambition of *The Division* – referring to it as 'the most current-gen game' doesn't really have the same impact. But then, perhaps the description needn't change at all. As much as top-end titles like *Killzone: Shadow Fall* and *Ryse* might push the graphical envelope, neither does much to challenge any aspect of the new hardware besides the GPU. *The Division*, then, is still next-gen – it's the first real glimpse at what the wave of post-launch-window games will do above and beyond what the initial glut of cross-platform titles and day-one showpieces have done.

A lot is being made of the engine and, to be fair, in a game that's rendering a realistic and believable New York City with thousands of players online at the same time, that's probably not a bad shout. It's some truly remarkable tech, too – the kind of thing decades of Emotion Engine-style press releases have taught us to be wary of – but, when seen in motion, it's evidently several rungs above any of its competitors. And it's the gameplay connotations of each of its bullet points that makes it all the more interesting – volumetric smoke and particle effects will dissipate far quicker in the open streets than a cramped sewer tunnel, for instance. While accurate material physics stand to truly evolve the battlefield – wood and sheet metal can be easily penetrated by any gun that doesn't say 'Nerf' on the side, making usual cover shooter staples like cars, bins and fences far less reliable than they once were. You know, back when everything was just sturdy and bulletproof. Now *that*'s next-gen – having an environment that doesn't just look like the real thing but acts and reacts like it as well.





The Division may be the best game at E3 two years running – we're not expecting it to launch much before Q4 2014.



On-the-fly PvP gameplay is one of the most interesting aspects, although it remains to be seen exactly how this will be handled…

"IT'S EVIDENTLY SEVERAL RUNGS ABOVE ANY OF ITS COMPETITORS"

While the two seem to be coming from very different places, *The Division* shares an awful lot of DNA with *Destiny*. The connected experience, the ad-hoc multiplayer battles, the random loot drops… indeed, Bungie's successes and/or failures will likely shape *The Division* for the better. With the sci-fi FPS shooting first, it'll be the testing ground for a lot of the interesting social and multiplayer features it shares with *The Division* – the imminent beta especially will no doubt give some of the Ubisoft crew a few sleepless nights. We're also keen to see how far down the moral rabbit hole Ubisoft elects to venture – we know that groups can meet and either join forces or battle in The Big Apple, but we don't yet know whether it's instruction from on high or player choice that fuels that decision. In the wake of *DayZ*, we're hoping it's the latter. That human element – morality balanced against panic, distrust and self-preservation – can make for some seriously intense moments. Again, pretty next-gen, considering how few games can claim to make players think at all, let alone to that extent.

Ubisoft may own the Clancy name but its reluctance to slap it on just anything has meant that it retains a degree of gravitas, of kudos and of quality – there's no Tom Clancy's Just Dance, for instance, and every new *Rainbow Six* or *Splinter Cell* is an event. *The Division* merely adds another feather to the oh-so-feathery Clancy cap, so fingers crossed its wild ambition and impressive engine are up to task.



This is a prototype of one of the Steam machines. Valve has announced nothing officially, but we hope its finished product looks like this – it'd be a pleasure to have this box in our living room.

2014: THE TECH

THE WIRED AND THE WONDERFUL

INSIGHT

Resolutiongate – After the controversy over the Xbox One's inability to run a slew of titles at 1080p, it's probably bad news for Microsoft that the Steam Machines promise to run Steam for Linux games at 1080p and at 60fps.

THE TECH

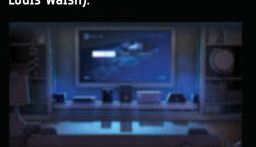
IT ISN'T JUST gaming software that we've got to look forward to in 2014 – the future is bright with the prospects of innovative game-centred hardware, too. Most notable is the Oculus Rift, which promises to bring virtual-reality immersion back into the realms of reality after being banished from popular consciousness as an impractical sci-fi fantasy. The CEO of Oculus VR, Brendan Iribe, is gunning for a public release of the VR headset in 2014, and is intent on keeping the tech around $300 in price.

The Oculus Rift will be compatible with PC and Android devices. We'll be seeing the Oculus extending its mobile connectivity before we'll see it achieve compatibility with consoles, it seems. This makes sense, though – mobiles have a progressive outlook and can adapt to their technological context every year whereas consoles live on six-to-eight-year life cycles.

We've spent some time with the Oculus Rift – particular highlights for us were Bossa Studios' *Surgeon Simulator* and *Team Fortress 2*, which supported an omni-directional treadmill, too. While we did end up feeling a little disorientated and dubious of where the average gamer would put an omni-directional treadmill in their house, the hands-on did make us realise that the Oculus offers up genuine opportunities to move gameplay away from the traditionalist genres and tropes that a lot of developers are sticking to at the moment.

2014 will also see the release of the Steam Machine (which we're fondly referring to as the Gabestation). Rumours abound that the Steam boxes will ship at around $499, matching the Xbox One's price, and will run on the recently announced SteamOS, an operating system capable of running every Steam game you've ever downloaded.

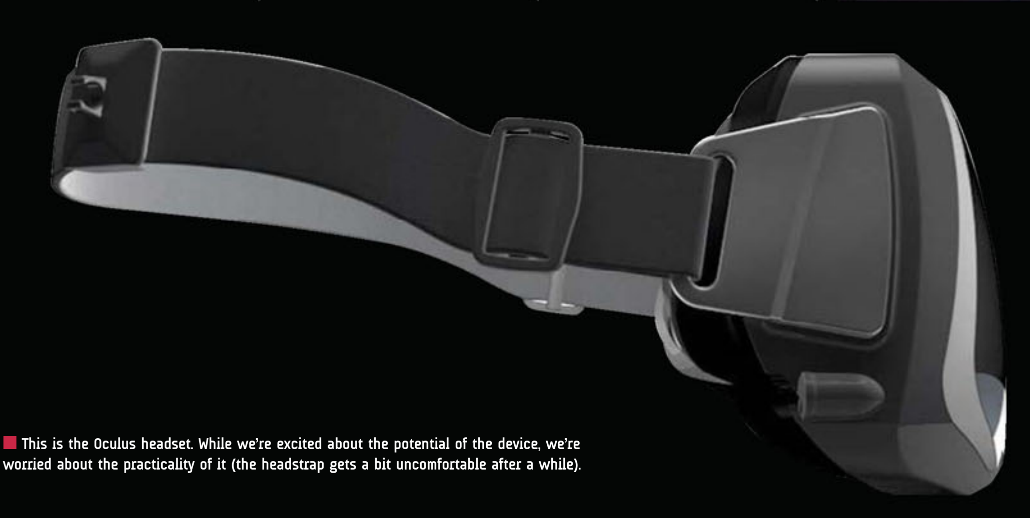




The Steam Controller has been put together to allow users to really make it their own (to sound like Louis Walsh).

The components of the Steam Machines will be fully customisable with off-the-shelf computer parts, so you can upgrade your machine on a whim or even build your Steam Machine from the ground up, as you would a traditional desktop.

The Boxes will also be compatible with Valve's recently announced Steam Controller – a device featuring two clickable thumb-controlled trackpads that will act as traditional thumbsticks and a touchscreen in the middle. The controller will apparently feature ridiculously precise haptic feedback that supersedes the quality of traditional controller rumble. According to Valve, the controller can 'trick' older games into thinking they have a keyboard and mouse input, rather than the controller, and the Steam community will be able to create custom configs that can be downloaded by other users and bound to older software. The possibilities for the controller certainly sound appealing, but with no hardware having yet been sent out, we're cautious of Valve's promises.

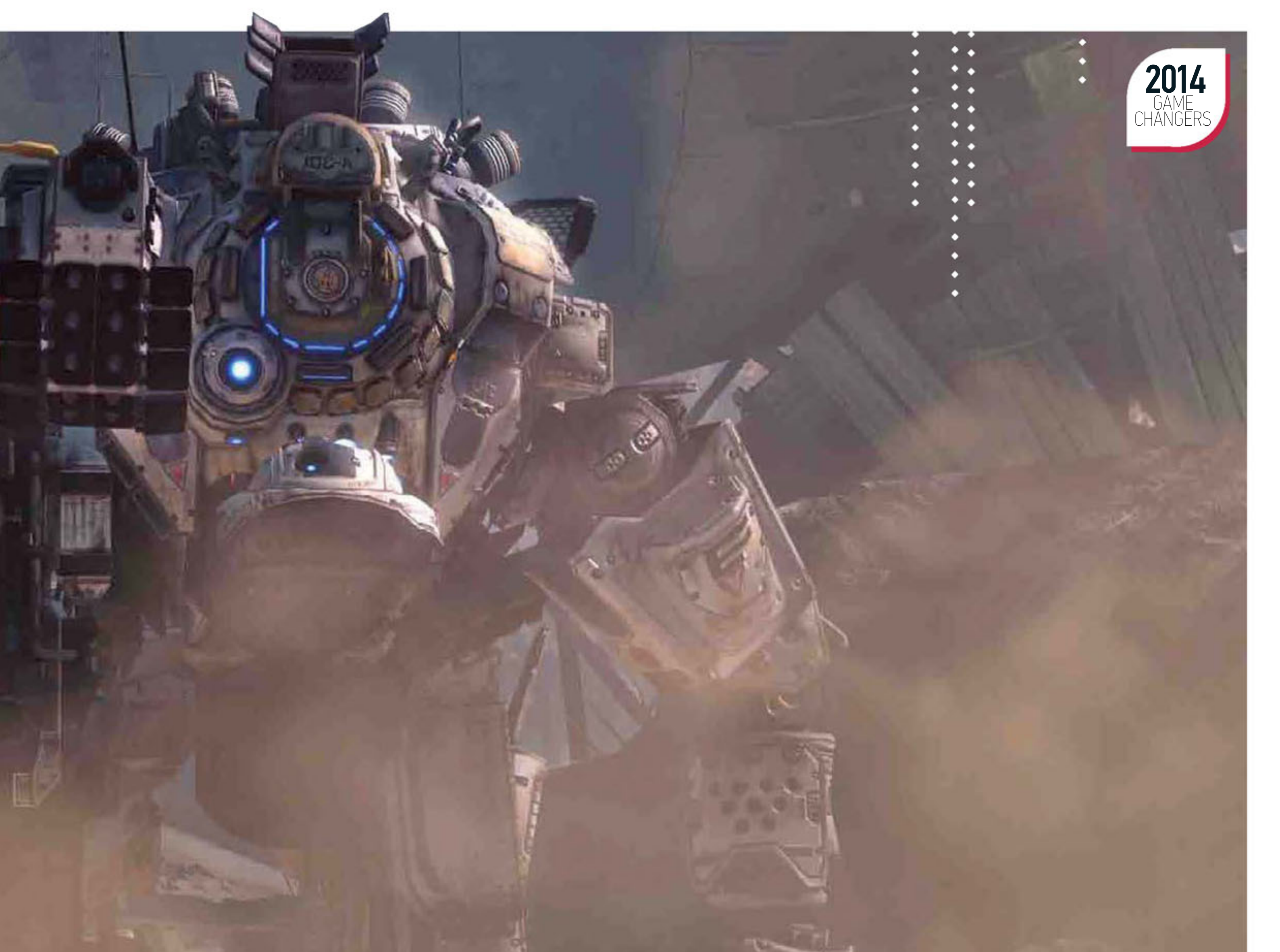


This is the Oculus headset. While we're excited about the potential of the device, we're worried about the practicality of it (the headstrap gets a bit uncomfortable after a while).



“THE FEEDBACK WE’RE GETTING FROM FANS AROUND THE WORLD IS FUELLING OUR TEAM AS WE HEAD TOWARDS MARCH”
VINCE ZAMPELLA, RESPAWN ENTERTAINMENT

■ While *Titanfall* is a Microsoft exclusive, Respawn has stated that it hopes to bring the franchise to other platforms in the future.



TITANFALL

A MULTIPLAYER CAMPAIGN WITH HEART: THE UNION OF NARRATIVE AND GAMEPLAY

Format: FPS **Publisher:** Electronic Arts **Developer:** Respawn Entertainment **Release date:** 13 March

AS THE RELEASE date for *Titanfall* appears on the horizon, developer Respawn Entertainment has begun to fill in some of the gaps in our knowledge of the game. While demo levels have given a flavour of what individual moments might feel like, it's only recently that we've begun to get a picture of the game as a whole. From the sounds of it, *Titanfall* has one defining purpose: to bring together the opposite ends of what makes your average modern shooter and use the resulting concoction to push the genre forwards.

According to senior map designer Mohammad Alavi, it's about time for a change, as the FPS has been more or less the same since the seminal *Half-Life*, inevitably built around trying to tell a good story without taking away from what makes these shooters so fun. As far as that goal is concerned, "Some games have been more successful than others," he says, "But the formula is starting to get a little stale." Respawn wants to refresh the genre through its own interpretation of the relationship between narrative and gameplay, which seems to attribute the story side of things to single-player campaigns and the bulk of the fun to online multiplayer. As far as the brains behind *Titanfall* see it, the solution to the problem of the tired FPS is therefore simple: take the best of single-player and the best of multiplayer and find a way to fit those aspects into one mode of play. Though the MMORPG has already done that to some extent, *Titanfall* represents a significant effort to make it work with those features that distinguish the FPS.

When Alavi starts to talk about the ambitions the developer has for this Campaign Multiplayer, it's clear to see why *Titanfall* has been met with such fierce anticipation, as the developer reels off, in his own admittance, features that "sound like 'back of the box bullet points'." "[It's] a universe you can believe and relate to that's also interesting and new", he tells us. "[There are] characters that you'll have an emotional attachment to, situations that will stay with you and keep you coming back for more." Then again, as you can probably tell from the concept of a game world that is somehow both relatable and new, Respawn is determined to please as many people as possible.

But what the embellishments boil down to, however, is an interesting core concept. Break down the desire to "present a character-driven cinematic experience, and immerse you in a living, breathing world, without ever taking control away from the player", and you get the »

» promise of a middle ground, between single-player campaigns where you're led by the hand and made to stand and watch as helicopters explode, and the player-led excitement that can unfold when you're placed in a map with other real people and left to pursue your goal.

The success or failure of this plan will rest on how players respond. From what we've seen so far, we know that the multiplayer action in *Titanfall* is exhilarating, adding a sprinkling of new features – jetpacks, Titans – to the traditional formula that completely changes how it feels to play. The resultant new abilities – to run up a wall and attack from above as a Pilot, for instance, or to rip an enemy from the heart of their own machine as a Titan – should convince players that this is something different from the modern shooters whose online multiplayer modes fill our time now. Unless Respawn manages to mess it up between now and the launch of the game, *Titanfall* should deliver as far as gameplay is concerned.

On the other side of the coin, of course, is the narrative. Respawn wants a story that is character-driven, immersive, believable but new, emotional, and memorable. That's a lot to ask, even from a game with only a single-player campaign, but it seems like *Titanfall* will embody muted versions of these promises: brief moments of emotional impact that will momentarily give you pause, perhaps, rather than full-on drama. Some of these goals for the narrative will also be naturally helped by the gameplay: any section of the story probably will be memorable if that's when you pulled off a skilful set of moves that helped your side to secure what seemed an unlikely victory.

Respawn has clearly taken a good, long look at single-player campaigns in other modern shooters – perhaps with one eye always on the *Call Of Duty* series, originally the brainchild of Respawn founders Jason West and Vince Zampella – and selected those aspects that seem best able to produce these desired responses in the player. From what Alavi says, that comes down to each level having "an objective that is presented in a cinematic way, with twists and turns that occur as you play."

That first part takes the form of scripted, cinematic events that primarily take place between the moments in which you actually play. Before a mission, you'll be given your objective in a manner much more exciting than reading text on a screen. So far we've seen the Angel City level begin with a scripted sequence in which some of the

> "AS WITH ANY GOOD STORY, WE'VE HOPEFULLY PEPPERED IT WITH ENOUGH DETAIL AND NUANCE THAT YOU'LL NOTICE SOMETHING NEW EVERY TIME"
>
> MOHAMMAD ALAVI, RESPAWN ENTERTAINMENT



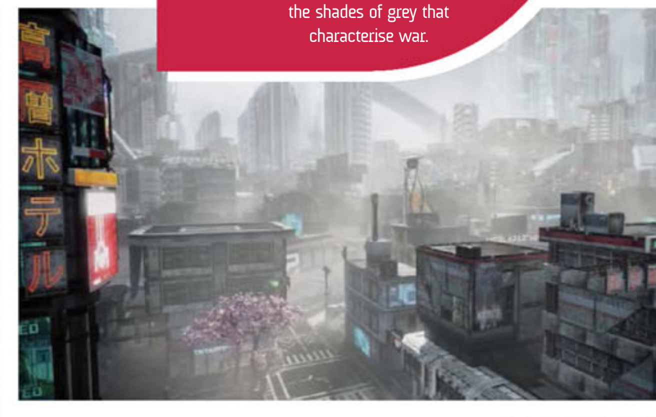
Rather than read your objective during a loading screen, you'll often get to hear it from an NPC, like a man giving instructions from inside his Titan.

TWO SIDES OF THE STORY

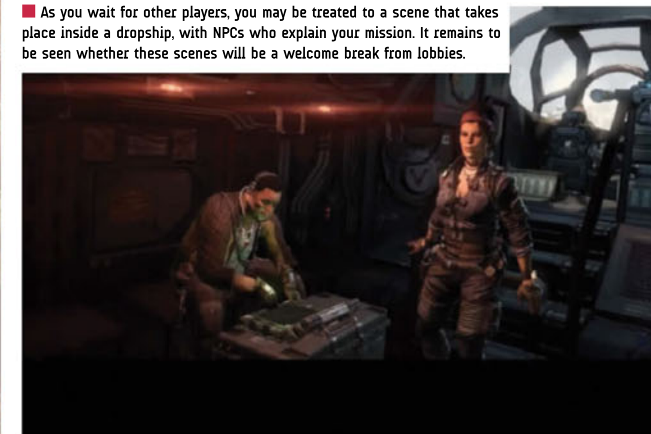
The story that players will navigate through the Campaign Multiplayer has a beginning, middle, and end, but one completion will not give you the whole picture. Once you've finished the campaign as a member of one of the factions – either the Interstellar Manufacturing Corporation (IMC) or Militia – you'll get to relive the story as the other. Aside from a relatively simple way to double the amount of gameplay, this dual-sided story provides a safe fictional space in which the player can encounter the shades of grey that characterise war.



As well as the smaller pieces of story conveyed during each of the missions in the Campaign Multiplayer, *Titanfall* has an overarching narrative that takes place in a futuristic world plagued by conflict.



As you wait for other players, you may be treated to a scene that takes place inside a dropship, with NPCs who explain your mission. It remains to be seen whether these scenes will be a welcome break from lobbies.



player's teammates retrieve a drunk Pilot called Barker, apparently an important figure for the resistance. The example is relatively low on the cinematic scale, but that's not necessarily a bad thing. Maybe *Titanfall*, without the threat of overwhelmingly similar competitors that might outdo it with even bigger setpieces and even more controversial drama, can afford to dial it down.

Away from these pieces of story that will spice up such dull but necessary moments as changing your loadouts while you wait in the multiplayer lobby, particular single-player style features are meant to continue the narrative within the missions. NPCs will appear in the corner of your screen, offering updates to give the sensation that the world around you is more than a static playing field. As you busy yourself taking out a Titan with a Magnetic Grenade Launcher, or charging in with your own Titan to confuse the battlefield with a cloud of smoke, you might hear an AI character congratulate or thank you for saving them.

The goal to make a multiplayer game that somehow also feels like single-player is an interesting one, but we've yet to see how well it will work in the wild. AI footsoldiers might stand out as a stark contrast to the Pilots played by actual human beings. Varied and tuned to your particular actions as their speech may be, it will never feel as natural as the strategic conversations you have with your human teammates. In a story where your character doesn't speak, or at least doesn't speak with your voice, that doesn't matter, but in multiplayer it may be jarring to be congratulated by your friend one moment and a voice actor the next.

> "IT MAY BE JARRING TO BE CONGRATULATED BY A VOICE ACTOR"

Another narrative feature that seems an uneasy fit with multiplayer is the concept of choice and the game's response. Alavi recalls the Fracture demo shown at E3, in which the success or failure of the player's mission to capture and hold hard-points "directly led to the fate of the Redeye capital ship." The idea that your performance in a multiplayer match might have more of an effect than numbers on a scoreboard is an exciting one, but it seems that the way the game is formed will prevent the relationship between your actions and the narrative from going any further. Given the money and time it will have taken to develop every single mission in the Campaign Multiplayer, it seems unlikely that *Titanfall* will have room for a branching narrative with different objectives that only arise if you make particular choices.

Of course, Respawn wants us to believe that it has the balance right: that scripted AI will add to the experience, that the story will feel important to the experience despite its limitations, and most of all that players won't just get bored of the narrative repetition in the Campaign Multiplayer and instead stick to the regular multiplayer modes that are available from the outset. Traditionally, playing a shooter online has been more like playing a sport, with skills honed in accordance with a set of rules, and no need for a story. *Titanfall* looks set to be one hell of a good game, as long as the narrative doesn't get in the way.

Even after having spent years on the game, Alavi says he is still so surprised by the Campaign Multiplayer that he often says aloud, "I can't believe this is multiplayer." And that's what it all comes down to. It'll be everything Respawn has been hoping for if *Titanfall*'s players are similarly enchanted.

DEVELOPING AN INTEREST

DEVELOPERS TO KEEP AN EYE ON IN 2014

AVALANCHE



The *Just Cause 2* developer knows how to make a compelling and engaging open world game, and we think its work with the *Mad Max* IP this year will raise it to the same level of prestige you see with Bethesda and Rockstar. We firmly believe that the vehicular combat will work well in the Wasteland setting.

READY AT DAWN



Ready At Dawn has only really worked with ports and small handheld games up until now, and its first foray into console games proper is *The Order: 1886*. It's been given a significant budget, and if it can pull off a critically acclaimed game, then we could see a rival to Naughty Dog rise in the ranks of the Sony-exclusive developers.

BIOWARE

BIOWARE CORP

BioWare has been quiet for a while, but we expect 2014 to be a big year for the developer. Not only is *Dragon Age: Inquisition* launching, but we're almost certain there's going to be some big news regarding *Mass Effect 4*, too. Considering BioWare has access to the *Star Wars* IP, we think maybe an RPG in the vein of *Knights Of The Old Republic* could be on the cards as well.

MACHINEGAMES



Consisting of old Starbreeze staff, MachineGames is launching its first game this year – *Wolfenstein: The New Order*. If it goes well, it could be the start of a long and promising career for MachineGames – perhaps following the old Starbreeze route of taking on other IP and repurposing it into a game-friendly context.

VALVE



This is a big year for Valve, who will be departing from software-only development into its first pieces of hardware. We remain sceptical, but once the Steam Machines hit the shelves, perhaps we'll *finally* hear something about *Half-Life 3*, *Left 4 Dead 3*, *Team Fortress 3* or anything else with a '3' in the title…







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NO MAN'S SKY

STARING INTO THE GREAT UNKNOWN

Format: TBA **Publisher:** Hello Games **Developer:** In-house **Release date:** TBA 2014

THERE ARE SIX people living in space right now. Not in videogames, not metaphorically, but actually living up in this reality's literal space. When combined, the total number of days that the multi-national members of the thousand-mile-high club have lived in the infinite vacuum totals just little under a year. The bizarre truth is that it isn't some great sum of intergalactic explorers that roam the stars, but a small intrepid team of individuals that have worked hard to give themselves the opportunity to discover the secrets of the universe.

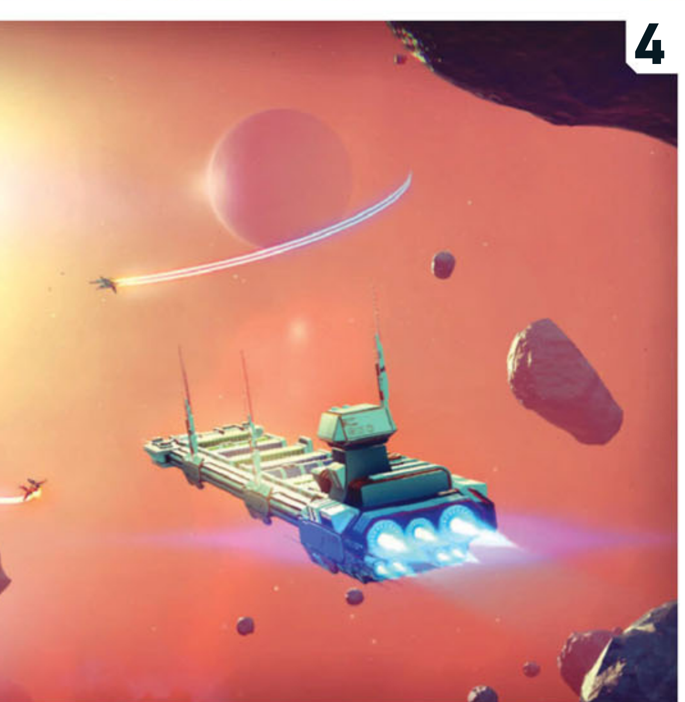
It's a similarly courageous journey that small indie outfit Hello Games is embarking on over the next year. Trading the comicality of its vibrant stunt racer series *Joe Danger* for the vast cosmos, it's a team of just four ambitious individuals located in the quaint Surrey town of Guildford that are preparing to launch the studio's most ambitious venture yet, *No Man's Sky*.

We were told back when *Joe Danger 2* was released that the studio would be moving onto something drastically different, but no one could've predicted the immeasurable scope of Hello Games' sci-fi space exploration game. It's an epic undertaking that came as a real surprise at last year's VGX awards, and a welcome one at that. Taking a closer look at the bewitching vision of *No Man's Sky*'s universe, **games™** goes on a trip into the unknown.

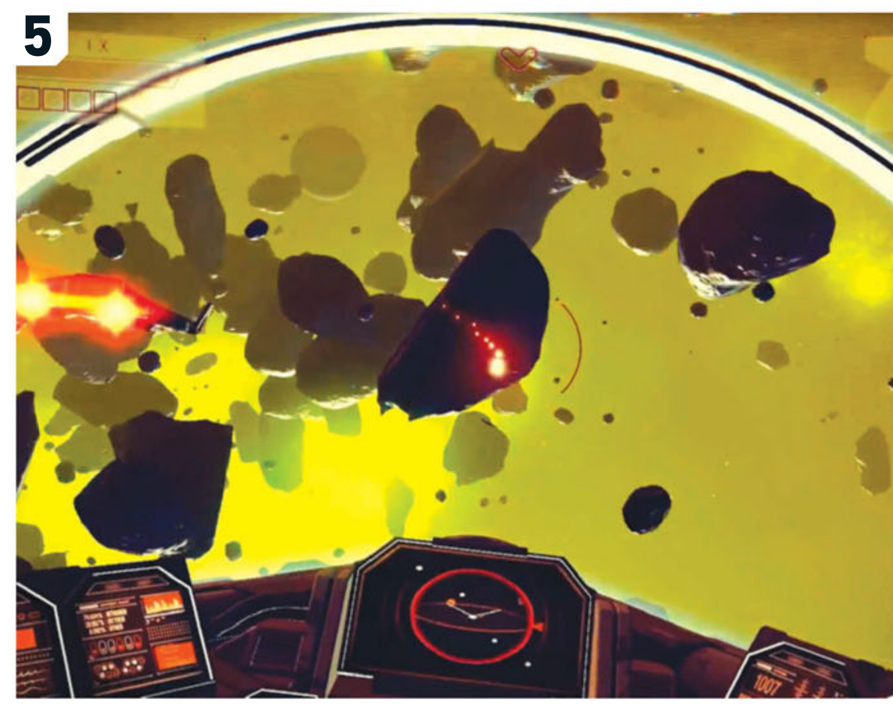
1 "EVERY PLANET PROCEDURAL. EVERY PLANET UNIQUE"

That's the tease that follows the stunning first footage of *No Man's Sky*. Much like *Minecraft*, the world is created on the fly, meaning that the universe is never the same from one play session to the next. Boldly going where no man has gone before is the accepted norm here, from giant sand worms that crash through the dunes on one sun-baked planet, to a recently crashed space cruiser buried in the side of a frozen peak. Each world is unlike anything you've seen before and won't be like anything you'll see again.

4



5



2 THE UNIVERSE IS TOO BIG FOR ONE PERSON

Players will start on their own planet on the edge of a universe buzzing with other pilots looking to discover new worlds. You'll start off in a vulnerable state. Your ship will need to be upgraded along with your character if you want to survive, therefore working together with other players is imperative. The community aspect has spiritual touchstones in *Minecraft*, *DayZ* and *Dark Souls*, which suggest that not everyone you'll encounter in space will be motivated by noble intentions.

3 FIGHTING TO SURVIVE – COMBAT IS CRUCIAL

An aspect that was merely suggested in the announcement video, combat is going to be vital to surviving some of the perils that wait in the darkest corners of space. Whether it's some creature roaming around its native planet in search of sustenance, or an enemy vessel in aggressive pursuit, you'll need to arm yourself with firepower to be able to fend off the dangers that await. Hello Games has only spoken about co-operative multiplayer to date, but we'd be surprised if PvP wasn't available.

4 JOURNEY TO THE CENTRE OF THE UNIVERSE

More than anything, the game is about exploration. Players can roam around *No Man's Sky* by land, sea or air, choosing to investigate each new planet with as much forensic care as they desire. The snippet of gameplay shows the player discovering a new ocean, before emerging on land and jumping into a spacecraft and flying outside of the planet's atmosphere. It promises the seamless transition from planet to planet that was teased in footage from the cancelled *Star Wars: Battlefront III*.

5 IT LOOKS LIKE A PROPER SCI-FI GAME

We're not saying that the genre hasn't been explored at all in the medium, it's just that developers often opt for the darker side of sci-fi – all apocalyptic drama and haunted space vessels. *No Man's Sky* enlivens the genre with wonder, enabling players to explore whole worlds at a time instead of a brief interlude in one isolated portion of a larger expanse. A procedural universe at your fingertips, a destination you plot yourself and an agenda completely of your own making.

INSIGHT

PROJECT SPARK

Team Dakota has spoken about running community competitions that'll incentivise users to create specific game ideas using *Project Spark*'s toolset. This will no doubt be key to the title's longevity.

PROJECT SPARK

A WORLD OF YOUR OWN MAKING

Format: Xbox 360, Xbox One **Publisher:** Microsoft **Developer:** Team Dakota **Release date:** TBA



We've seen several types of games created in *Project Spark*, from racers and shooters, to RPGs and simple tower defence experiences. There's an impressive amount of versatility.



Everything in the game has a brain that can be programmed. You can create bosses that have specific attack patterns, or just make a rock jump around for no good reason.

LIFE IS FILLED with distractions. It's a problem that has often afflicted creative gamers, those that tirelessly toil constructing miniature virtual playgrounds to broadcast across the community. The truth is it's not particularly practical sitting in front of your television for several hours a day twiddling the curvature of ramps in your *LittleBigPlanet* race course. People have lives to live, places to visit and jobs to do, worrying whether they've remembered to stoke the fires in The Prancing Pony before departing to an accurate *Minecraft* proxy of Middle-earth.

Now imagine that you could take your virtual world with you wherever you go. You could update it on the fly, continue to sculpt your creation during a bus journey or tinker with gameplay permutations during a business meeting.

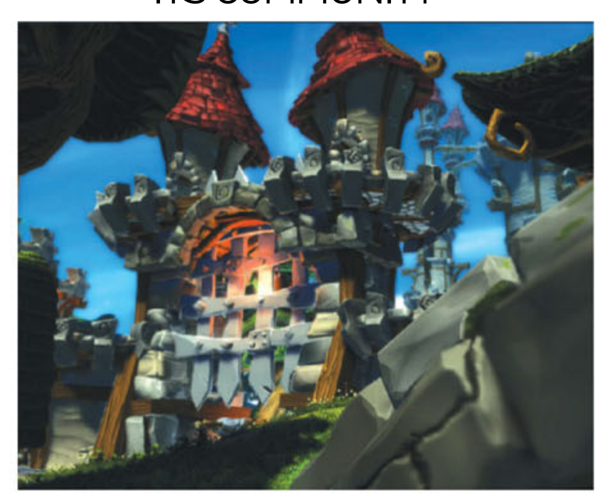
That's one of most progressive advancements that Team Dakota brings to Microsoft's first purpose-built user-generated title, *Project Spark*. While SmartGlass and second-screen experiences have yet to be fully embraced by the gaming community, the ground-up experience Team Dakota has created in tandem with its Xbox One game maker has the potential of shifting the perception of the undernourished companion app market. However, *Project Spark* isn't just accessible on Windows 8 tablets to twiddle with throughout the day, enabling users to save their game in the Cloud and access it on PC, Xbox 360 or Xbox One. It offers the freedom to create at anytime, anywhere (that is, along as you're kitted out with all the latest Microsoft hardware).

But even better, the versatility of the available compatible devices enables for multiple inputs, offering the freedom to sketch, build and iterate using mouse and keyboard, touch controls and even Kinect (for voice-guided navigation), adding a deeper level of precision to the base analogue stick control.

The success of *Project Spark* will live or die by its community, and already Team Dakota has cultivated a thriving online colony of passionate beta testers. The studio invested heavily to ensure that not only were the user tools available broad enough to be understood by every skill level, but that the methods by which players can interact with one another is equally as accessible.

Twitch will be fundamental to this, as the main *Project Spark* website acts as a community portal updated with tutorials, competitions, user-generated levels, videos and tips, all likely to be reflected both within the in-game interface and on the SmartGlass display when used

"THE SUCCESS OF PROJECT SPARK WILL LIVE OR DIE BY ITS COMMUNITY"



The art direction creates a creative toolset with a rich fantastical vibe.

in conjunction with the console version of the game. Multiplayer has also been touted as a major feature, wherein players can cooperate to build and test stages in much the same fashion as the Xbox 360 edition of *Minecraft*.

But where *Project Spark* differs from Mojang's seminal world builder and its ilk is the manner of which is introduces you the rules of its world. Where most titles that rank among the finest in the user-generated content market provide the players with the tools and leave them to figure out the rest of the details, *Project Spark* guides players through the steps of actually making a game.

It's a daunting prospect but *Project Spark* quickly brings players up to speed. Brushes enable you to sculpt the terrain and make it your own, from broad strokes to tiny details, while Assembles are pre-programmed behaviours for objects that can be modified. Every object has a brain, one that can be programmed by selecting commands from a list. Each of these features is explored in *Project Spark*'s Crossroads mode, process that resembles a classic choose-your-own-adventure structure, with players steadily slotting together their own game while grasping the fundamental mechanics.

Team Dakota will also provide its own batch of levels to be explored, with each open to be pulled apart for further examination and adaptation. And clearly it's worked. We've watched *Pilotwings*-esque flight simulators, comprehensive role-playing games and explosive shooters created and enjoyed by the community, each as innovative and impressive as the last. *Project Spark* might be the first game to live up to the promise of next-gen, offering an experience limited only by your own ambition.

MAX: THE CURSE OF BROTHERHOOD

MIGHTIER THAN THE SWORD

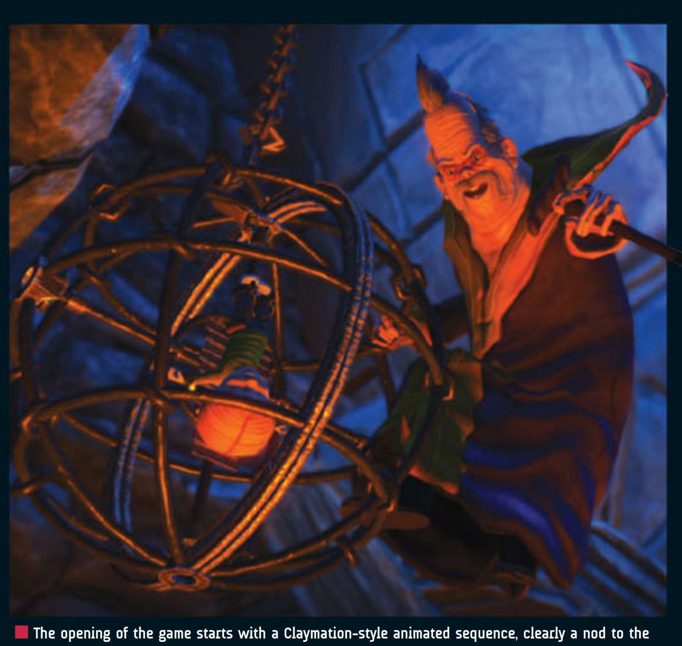
Format: Xbox 360, Xbox One **Publisher:** Microsoft **Developer:** Press Play **Release date:** Early 2014

MAX: THE CURSE Of Brotherhood is a fresh start for developer Press Play. Acting as a reboot of the mostly forgotten *Max And The Magic Marker* rather than a straight sequel, *The Curse Of Brotherhood* promises to deliver on the brain-tickling conceit introduced in the studio's overlooked debut.

And it's a simple one too: the eponymous hero must use a magic pen he's endowed with to harnesses a series of elemental powers, which aid him in traversing a mysterious fantastical world to find his kidnapped brother. These come in five flavours: Branch, Water, Earth, Fire and Vines, each drawn using the enormous marker pen that engulfs the screen. The trick is that Max can only drag these powers at specific triggers, which makes every few steps a fresh puzzle to be solved.

We played one of the game's later stages in the penultimate chapter, which involves Max guiding his brother in a steel hamster ball around a lava-filled factory environment. Guiding the contraption over one of the molten death pits below involves using vines (attached to the top of the cage) and water to guide it over the chasm. It's simple enough, but once we stumble upon the next puzzle that introduces more powers, figuring out how to navigate around the world's perils becomes a case of trial-and-error (and countless visions of a young child meeting a fiery death).

It's fair to say that there's a touch of morbid humour here in a manner not entirely dissimilar to the exceptional *Limbo* (albeit with a much more colourful palette). Indeed, it also strikes the same judicious balance of captivating aesthetics, dark wit and stimulating challenge that earned the indie hit such widespread acclaim on its release. Released on Xbox One at the end of 2013 and heading to Xbox 360 in the coming months, find out next issue whether Max is the first great puzzle-oriented platform title to arrive on next-gen hardware.



The opening of the game starts with a Claymation-style animated sequence, clearly a nod to the work of *The Nightmare Before Christmas* director Henry Selick.

INSIGHT

Hiryu's scarf has a more practical purpose in the new game. It represents Hiryu's Ki energy, presenting HUD information to players while growing in length as Hiryu gains additional energy.

STRIDER

STRIDER

A CUT ABOVE

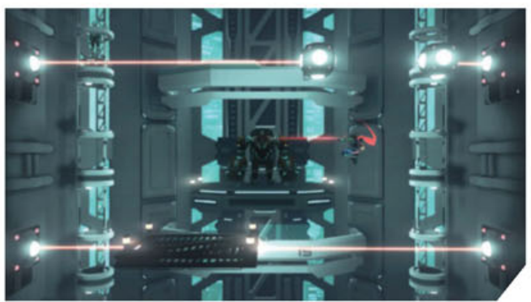
Format: Multi **Publisher:** Capcom **Developer:** Double Helix Games **Release date:** TBA



Hiryu can jump, flip, slide and climb on almost any surface and the Metroidvania-style map design utilises the full extent of his agility.



We're happy to report that Strider himself retains the ultra-responsive, swift and agile nature that made the original's mechanics feel uniquely fine-tuned.



As part of the reboot's dedication to honouring the original, the first boss you encounter is, as in the original, the tremendous cybernetic entity Ouroboros.

THE LAST COUPLE of years have seen Capcom enthusiastically delve into its vast archive of iconic characters in an attempt to reignite interest in some of its forgotten brands. *DuckTales* waddled onto consoles a few months ago, and we'll bear witness to the start of *Mega Man*'s comeback in next year's *Super Smash Bros.* sequel. But nothing has quite piqued the interest of gamers like the return of Strider Hiryu, the titular star of the arcade series that pitted the ninja against a series of increasingly absurd enemies that ranged from Amazonian warriors to mechanised gorillas.

"*Strider* has consistently maintained its position as one of Capcom's most iconic franchises," says Capcom producer James Vance when talking about the origins of the revival. "The hero, Strider Hiryu, often ranks high in Capcom polls as a best loved character. More than anything it was this vote of confidence in the *Strider* universe that served as the impetus for kicking off the project."

Creator Kouichi 'Isuke' Yotsui isn't involved, with the development duties passed on to developer Double Helix Games, responsible for Xbox One's *Killer Instinct* and 2012's *Battleship* movie tie-in. An odd choice on the surface it may appear, but Capcom was sold on the studio's passion for the universe. "High-level discussions with Double Helix Games about collaborating on a classic Capcom franchise began over three years ago," reveals Vance. "At this time several ideas were on the drawing table, but in the end *Strider* was the one that both Double Helix Games and Capcom were most passionate about pursuing. As with the Capcom team, the team at Double Helix Games are not only huge fans of the franchise, but from the outset they exhibited an in depth understanding of the core components and mechanics which define a *Strider* game."

While he hasn't appeared in his own title since the sequel graced arcades 16 years ago, the character's legacy has endured thanks to a clutch of appearances in the *Marvel vs. Capcom* games – Vance confirms that the new game will take "into account Hiryu as he is presented in *Strider 1* and *2* as well as *Marvel vs. Capcom*" with his Heavy Attack and Option-A (robot) attack taken directly from his *Marvel vs. Capcom* incarnation. It isn't a surprise that the narrative won't continue from *Strider 2*'s conclusion. "*Strider* is a re-imagining of the first encounter between Strider Hiryu and his nemesis Meio," confirms Vance. "It is not a remake, but an entirely new game. That being said, nods and winks to previous games are included for the fans who, if they keep an open eye, should get a nice nostalgic kick."

The return of imaginative boss battles was also one of the core pillars of the original and its sequel, from the graceless wonder of the Mecha Pon to the lawyer-baiting inclusion of Godzilla, and Double Helix wanted to carry on the legacy. "Some fan favourites will be making a return, albeit powered-up for the 21st century," says Vance.



THIEF

EIDOS MONTREAL'S GRITTY REBOOT

Format: Multi **Publisher:** Square Enix **Developer:** Eidos Montreal
Release date: 28 February

"The world of *Thief* has always been fairly dark and mature," Steven Gallagher, *Thief*'s narrative director explains to us. "It's driven by anticipation – that feeling of 'Am I going to get caught? Is this going to work? Am I going to die?' [Garrett] is emotionally always fighting this feeling of being trapped, and not wanting to be – he sees The City as his own, and just like the player had fun exploring all the dark corners of The City in previous *Thief* games, Garrett can do that here. 'This is where I live. This is mine.'"

The original games attracted criticism because the protagonist often felt a little too deadly – a little too lethal to be a legitimate thief. You'd think someone in the burglary profession would want to keep as low a profile as possible, and some of the gameplay elements didn't reflect that. That's something Square Enix is keen to keep in mind. Our recent interview with team members Stéphane Roy, Steven Gallagher and Daniel Windfeld-Schmidt showed us one thing with absolute clarity; these guys care about their product, and are keen to do the source material justice.

"The thing about *Thief* is that it gives you the option between stealth and action," Gallagher told us. "There are players out there like myself who like taking it slow; hearing everything and seeing everything and wringing out every last drop from a game..." Gallagher pauses for a second and Windfeld-Schmidt, lead level designer, jumps in – "but if you go back to the original, a lot of people played those games very differently. Running on carpets, jumping up, knocking somebody out! You know, that's pretty aggressive, but it was still an option you had. That's what we want, for stealth to be one part. If you want to be more of a predator, there are ways of playing like that, too..."

"These are two very different reward systems in the same product," finishes off Gallagher. This news excited us – we had some hands-on time with the game, and played some levels that backed you into stealthy corners. Knowing that the developer is keen to allow you some brutal options – should you need them – makes the game's promise of being a legitimate thief simulator more of a reality. It's easy to think you'll creep in and out of some high-security vault unhindered, sure, but when those guards chase you down you're going to want some weight behind you.

> "THE WORLD OF THIEF HAS ALWAYS BEEN FAIRLY DARK AND MATURE"

Garrett's main weapon is his cunning (not the bow shown in the picture, although we imagine that's certainly going to help).

INSIGHT

THIEF

Thief was originally announced way back in 2009 under the title *Thief 4*, however it's believed that Eidos Montreal scrapped early designs during its long development.

It's all very dark and gloomy, but when you do come across a light source, the shadows that fall onto the walls are spectacularly rendered.



Thief will be taking a lot of inspiration from the previous games in the series.



THE SIMS 4

PURE AND SIMPLE

Format: PC **Publisher:** EA **Developer:** The Sims Studio **Release date:** Late 2014

INSIGHT

To replicate all the nuance of social behaviour, The Sims Studio filmed colleagues in secret during work functions and studied interactions to perfectly capture all the mannerisms and quirks in the Sims themselves.

THE SIMS 4

FOR A GAME THAT was originally made as a satire on the suburban domestic dream of middle-America, the Sims franchise took an unfortunately capitalistic turn in its last iteration – *The Sims 3* may as well have been called *DLC: The Game*, with so many content drops coming to form the central experience of the entire game. *The Sims 4* is a killswitch for that, it seems – having been in development for three years, the game has gone on a journey through various development teams, reworking and reengineering core aspects of the game in a process that's seen every element scrutinised. The focus has been on what makes a Sim a Sim – that is to say, Maxis is paying close attention to what makes our digital alter-egos even more human.

Graham Nardone, associate producer on the title, told us; "Our new tech that's driving more lifelike behaviour sounds like a subtle change, but it has a big impact in how the game is played. Now the balance between managing your Sim's needs versus progressing their lives via things like skills, careers, relationships, and aspirations becomes a more interactive experience, where your Sim's successes and failures are directly defined by you as the player." This technology is called SmartSim – and it grants the Sims the ability to multitask, engage in real group dynamics, move fluidly and believably and makes their entire life that much more authentic. "Artificial intelligence is one of the areas where videogames can still improve by leaps and bounds, and we're concentrating many of our efforts there. Think of it like this… have you ever wished you had a little more time in your day to get things done? The changes we've made help you accomplish just that for your Sims!"

This is an important point for the sequel to focus on – the main point of *The Sims* is escapism. As a distraction, the game taps into the appeal of a perfect domestic existence; the ability to micromanage simplified aspects of life engages that part of our personalities that craves control. That isn't to say everyone wants to be a benevolent puppet-master; *The Sims* is infamous for bringing out the dark side of players. "If you're more of a deviant player, we're going to have a lot of fun things in there for you to be able to mess with other Sims, control their lives, manipulate them, make them have a miserable existence," explains Nardone. "If you want to do that, it's going to be there for you."

While some players will enjoy this potential for sadism, other may balk at it – some players want a sense of progression from *The Sims*, not just an excuse to get megalomaniacal. "The way we think of sandbox – you know, this open world filled with tools that you can go in, manipulate, play with, set up scenarios exactly how you want – that's different than how our players think of a sandbox. Really, to them, sandbox is another word for life simulation and what they want are more tools, more freedom to play out their lives in any variety of ways that they want. They think sandbox, they just want more gameplay options, more ways to do the same thing. [*The Sims 4*] is really about going back there, adding more depth into the gameplay, giving them the ability to tell stories in ways that relate to them."

> "EACH SIMS GAME WE CREATE IS A LEARNING PROCESS THAT HELPS SET THE FOUNDATION FOR [THE] FUTURE"

That's an interesting point – using the game as a canvas upon which to paint your own, personally relevant stories. The original *Sims* is a game in which you can never really *succeed* – you just keep the mundanity of dollhouse life at bay by acquiring more stuff: a big, airy house; a loyal and attentive partner; a well-paid and satisfying job; a healthy and vibrant social life. The challenge for *The Sims 4* will be keeping that appeal alive.

"Each *Sims* game we create is a learning process that helps set the foundation for future development," Nardone explains. "A great example of this in *The Sims 4* are the advancements we've made in Build Mode to retain the powerful tools that our long-time fans have come to expect, as well as providing a more welcoming experience for those who haven't delved into personalising their virtual home before. We introduced the concept of Blueprints during *The Sims 3*; we saw what worked, and what we'd ideally change with that system, and incorporated those learnings into *The Sims 4* to create a very robust room catalogue with expanded functionality that players will immediately appreciate. It's very flexible and helps ease players into making the world their own."

It all sounds very promising – and Maxis' focus on the single-player experience is reassuring. There's thought and effort gone into the ability to make your Sim avatars become more like you – there's even a feature that allows you to customise their memories. The detail in which you can recreate yourself in this open-ended sandbox realm is extensive, and we look forward to seeing what levels of havoc we can test our virtual selves with when the game launches in Autumn 2014.

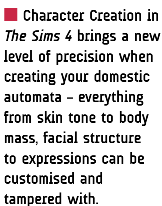




The overall art style of the game has shifted from the aspirational picket fence suburbia to a more Southern style – evoking the feelings of airy gallery houses in an all-American wonderland.







Character Creation in *The Sims 4* brings a new level of precision when creating your domestic automata – everything from skin tone to body mass, facial structure to expressions can be customised and tampered with.





Maxis is keeping the lid on exactly how open the career path for your Sims will be, but we definitely know you can be a sedentary writer, binge eating junk food and playing games all day. Sorted.

INDIE UPRISING

INDIE GAMES TO WATCH OUT FOR IN THE YEAR TO COME

TRANSISTOR



Bastion was a great game – somewhere between the vivid and vibrant art direction and sublime soundtrack lay a game that studied the core aspects of an RPG and breathed fresh life into them. *Transistor* looks to carry that on; with a talking sword, fresh combat and time-freezing mechanics, what's not to get excited about?

ELITE: DANGEROUS



David Braben and Frontier Developments took to Kickstarter to fund this game, which had been floating around in development limbo for about a decade. The game is listed as a 'space trading and combat simulator' and is set in an open galaxy. If you enjoyed the original *Elite*, then this game is one to keep an eye on.

HOTLINE MIAMI 2: WRONG NUMBER



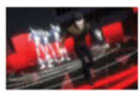
The modern-retro, self-aware, amoral stylings of *Hotline Miami* burnt lasting impressions into the eyes and brain of **games™**, and from what we've seen of the sequel, we expect it to do exactly the same – albeit in a much more pronounced and in-your-face manner.

EVERYBODY'S GONE TO THE RAPTURE



The Chinese Room is developing its new PS4 exclusive to show the countryside of Shropshire in the final moments before the apocalypse, keen to show off what games can uniquely do with storytelling, and that gets us very excited indeed. More British apocalypse stories, please.

VOLUME



Mike Bithell's oldschool 'crime simulator' takes its inspiration from the original *Metal Gear Solid* and promises to be traditional stealth gaming, held together with a tight and introspective narrative. Gorgeous lighting, interesting character design and an intriguing theme put this game on our radar for next year's big indie releases.

FABLE ANNIVERSARY

A STORY WORTH RETELLING

Format: RPG **Publisher:** Microsoft Game Studios **Developer:** Lionhead Studios **Release date:** 7 February

BEFORE THE XBOX One steps into the future of the *Fable* franchise – one that is notably less Molynuexy and very much scaling back on horse-play – first the series is taking a trip back into its past. On the tenth anniversary of Lionhead's signature role-playing adventure, the studio is celebrating the occasion by giving the original a contemporary spruce.

"Whenever we go to an expo with any *Fable* title, it becomes very apparent that a lot of our fanbase joined us with *Fable 2* on the Xbox 360," says *Fable Anniversary*'s lead designer, Ted Timmins. "There's a lot of gamers that have played *Fable 2* & *Fable 3*, but never *Fable: The Lost Chapters* – and that's a really special game to have missed out on! With this in mind, at last year's 'Lionhead Creative Day' – a 'day' where we are given a few days to work on any idea of our choice. I got together with a rather large group of *Fable* fans in the office and we managed to recreate the opening sequence to *Fable* running in Unreal 3. We haven't talked about this point much, but having an appearance at Creative Day with a prototype of *Fable Anniversary* looking and sounding glorious on a cinema screen, I feel it got a lot of the leadership team talking about it being feasible. Fast forward 16 months, and here we are!"

Having worked at the studio for over a decade, Timmins describes the opportunity to retell the first chapter of the *Fable* legacy as "an incredible privilege." His first challenge was overhauling the clunky control scheme, so it more closely resembled the innovations made in the sequels. Timmins also points towards the lock-on system as another feature that desperately needed improvement: "I was a tester on the original game and found it very unpredictable to use – so that's a fix ten years in the making! Sometimes though it's the detail that makes the most difference, and we've made countless little touches to leave no stone unturned. I hope there's some *Fable* fans out there that will enjoy playing spot the difference!"

Indeed, and if there's one person in particular who'd be able to spot any deviations from the original design then it's the man who created it. "On the second day of E3, Peter [Molyneux] dropped by the booth and he got his first and only hands-on with the game," reveals Timmins, who worked with the ex-Lionhead boss for several years. "I asked for the thumbs down or thumbs up, and thankfully he gave it the thumbs up! I know Peter would have told me straight if he didn't like what he saw, but looking back now we've come so far since E3 that I hope everyone who saw the game then will now be blown away when they see the final version."

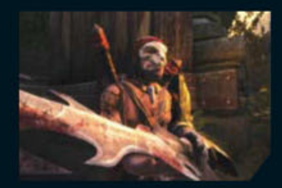
Anniversary makes a suite of changes to the original's mechanics – modifying the awkward quest save system, while the UI has undergone a similar upgrade – but what about the story? With *Fable Legends* confirmed to be taking place before the events of the first *Fable*, can we expect any recons to the established lore?

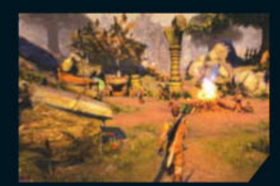
"There are a few little secrets in there," teases Timmins, "but I don't want to spoil them! As *Fable* is known for poking fun of itself, there's also a lot of self-references to some of the past, what shall we call it, 'Marketing Lore'? In summary; keep your eyes peeled for references to the Sandgoose, and maybe even an acorn!"

FABLE ANNIVERSARY

INSIGHT

This is the first *Fable* game to be made on the Unreal Engine. Xbox One's *Fable Legends* will be utilising Unreal Engine 4, so we're expecting beautiful, shiny graphics.





Timmins believes that, given the power of the Unreal Engine, *Fable Anniversary* is the best looking *Fable* game that the studio has made.



INSIGHT

Last year's VGX Awards confirmed the return of Cranky Kong (canonically the original Donkey Kong from the arcade classic). He joins Diddy and Dixie in the sequel.

DONKEY KONG COUNTRY: TROPICAL FREEZE



DONKEY KONG COUNTRY: TROPICAL FREEZE

THE RETURN OF THE GREAT APE

Format: Platformer **Publisher:** Nintendo **Developer:** Retro Studios **Release date:** 21 February

KENSUKE TANABE HAS only ever directed one game in his illustrious history at Nintendo, 1987's *Yume Kojo: Doki Doki Panic*, which would later be rebranded as *Super Mario Bros. 2*. And while it has been 16 years since the release of one of Mario's more unconventional adventures, the director-turned-producer still looks back to his debut for inspiration. Yes, *Donkey Kong Country: Tropical Freeze* will feature the 'Pluck' mechanic straight from *Super Mario Bros. 2* as one of its prominent new gameplay tools. "We decided to build a similar system into the game after a quarter of a century," Tanabe tells **gamesTM**. "Another feature is that some enemies, but not all, can be carried and thrown in a similar way to *Super Mario Bros. 2* as well."

With development on the sequel undertaken by Texas-based Retro Studios once again, the studio's sterling reputation for both balancing the legacy of iconic Nintendo creations, while squeezing innovative concepts at any available opportunity remains.

There is a legacy and a feel to the *Donkey Kong Country* franchise that we felt important to keep," Michael Kelbaugh, Retro Studios' president and CEO, explains. "We didn't want to deviate from that too much or it really wouldn't feel like a *Donkey Kong Country* game. However, the challenge is always how to keep the original style that the fans expect; yet introduce something new and exciting."

Tropical Freeze also introduces a new dynamic 3D camera, which galvanized the development team to expand the world of *Donkey Kong* and broaden challenges and obstacles in a more complexly designed series of levels.

"With every game we make, we strive to improve our overall skills in making Nintendo-quality titles," responds Kelbaugh when asked how the 3D *Metroid* games influenced the studio's approach to *Donkey Kong*'s 2D revival. "With every game we make, we get better. In that sense, yes, the experience we gained working on the *Metroid Prime* franchise was invaluable.

"Specifically answering your question about 3D to 2D, what you may not realise is that we constructed the levels in *Donkey Kong Country Returns* and *Donkey Kong Country: Tropical Freeze* in very much the same manner as we did the levels in *Metroid Prime*. However, levels in *Returns* and *Tropical Freeze* are much, much larger and more detailed. And, I'll share this with you; we used the *Metroid Prime* engine and tools to develop *Returns*, so technically, the lessons learned on *Metroid Prime* were directly applied."

It begs the question whether we could see Donkey Kong make a successful return to 3D platformers in the near future. According to Kensuke Tanabe, it's quite possible we could see Nintendo's jungle king appear in a new 3D adventure.

"Maybe the *Donkey Kong Country* series over time will also feature both 2D and 3D titles like as in the *Super Mario* series!" he muses. "The style of the next *Donkey Kong Country* title would also depend on the game design."



Tropical Freeze marks the return of David Wise as composer, the man behind the music in the original SNES *Donkey Kong Country* games.



Dixie Kong's ponytail enables her to fly towards high platforms that the other characters can't reach.



Retro Studios wouldn't be drawn into discussing future plans of *Metroid*, but there's a possibility that the developer will return.

WOLFENSTEIN: THE NEW ORDER

MACHINEGAMES' CREATIVE DIRECTOR JENS MATTHIES DETAILS THE LONG-AWAITED REBOOT OF WOLFENSTEIN

Publisher: Bethesda Softworks **Developer:** MachineGames
Origin: Sweden **Release date:** Early 2014

DESPITE THE MEDIUM attracting perhaps the most passionate and vocal of all fan communities, the idea of a franchise reboot has never incited the ire of its fanbase in quite the same way as film or television. Quite the opposite in fact, and the upcoming *Wolfenstein: The New Order* serves as a perfect example of how an antiquated design document can be dusted off and contemporised for modern audiences, without compromising what made the original so beloved in the first place. One of the ex-Starbreeze Studios team that co-founded MachineGames, creative director Jens Matthies talks to **games™** about the challenges of bringing the Nazi undead back to life in the upcoming shooter.

How delicate do you have to be in playing with history in the manner you do? Are there any areas that you have to be particularly sensitive with?
Within the parameters of our alternate history, a retro sci-fi take on the *Wolfenstein* world, we do our utmost to respect the real world horrors and suffering of the era.

What was the motivation behind making the game single-player-only in an industry obsessed with including multiplayer modes in their FPS games?
Our mission as developers is to deliver the best possible game we can, and in our case, we're working to create a great single-player-only experience.

Your trailer featured some nods to Sixties pop-culture – will the game reflect culture we know and love but with a Nazi-inspired perspective?
Yes! We play a lot with 'What if…?' scenarios in this game. You learn a lot about your culture when you see it skewed through the lens of your worst enemy.

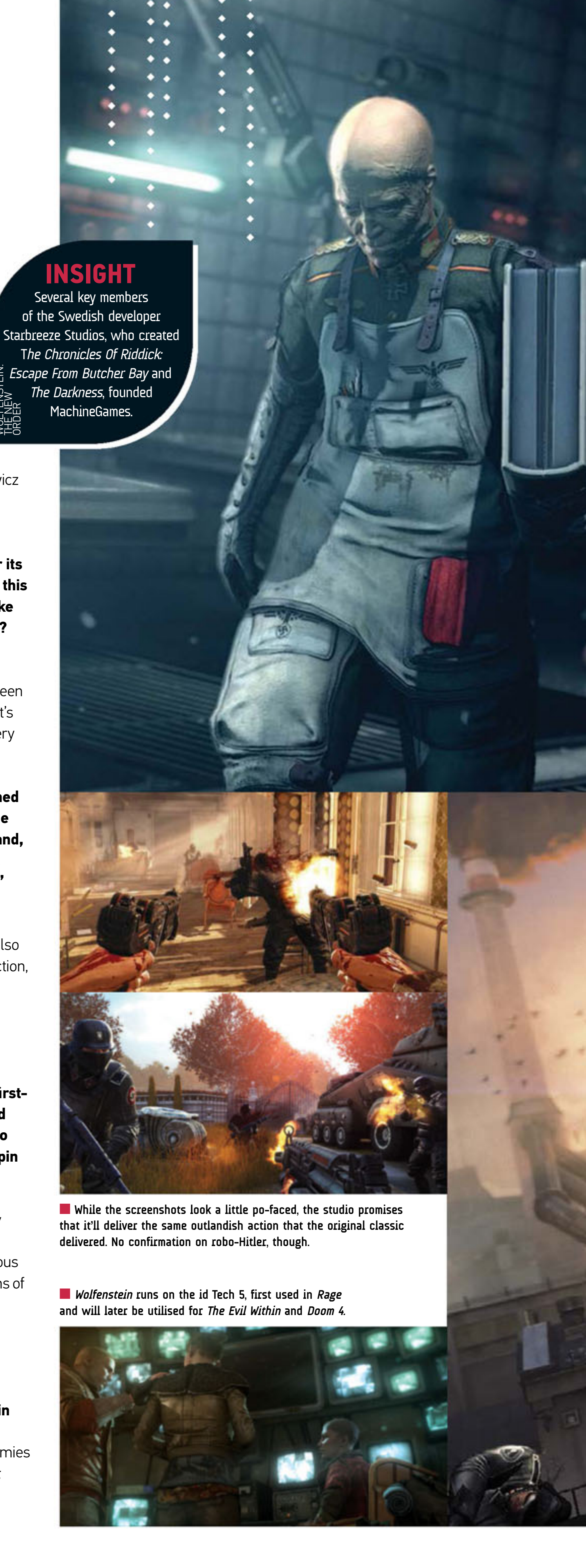
What values of the original *Wolfenstein* game would you say you're bringing to the reboot?
We've taken most inspiration from the original *Wolfenstein 3D*. Big guns, outlandish war machines, sci-fi elements and B.J. Blazkowicz as the muscle bound action hero grunt originally envisioned.

***Wolfenstein* has always been known for its fairly outlandish plots and parallels – is this game going to continue that trend or take the property down a more serious road?**
We want to honour the playful history of *Wolfenstein*, yet also introduce more storytelling and a genuine connection between the player and the characters in the game. It's a bit of a balancing act, but it also yields a very rewarding and unique result.

The studio is founded by people renowned for story-driven action games. Given the ridiculous nature of the *Wolfenstein* brand, what sort of challenge did it pose to tell an engaging narrative within the series' mythology?
We were inspired by other projects such as *Inglourious Basterds* and *District 9*, which also walk the tightrope between over-the-top action, comedy and honest drama. It's been really awesome to get the opportunity to create a story in a *Wolfenstein* world.

From what we've seen of the game's story, it appears this background with first-person storytelling in *The Darkness* and *Riddick* is more than applicable here. Do you feel you're able to offer your own spin on the franchise through this kind of narrative?
Yes, *Wolfenstein: The New Order* is in many regards an evolution of our sensibilities as developers. Anyone familiar with our previous games will certainly see similarities in terms of style and tone.

***Wolfenstein* is also a brand known for its exaggerated enemy design. Is this a feature you're looking to put your own unique stamp on? What can we expect in that regard?**
Yes, you can expect some over-the-top enemies when you play *Wolfenstein: The New Order*. A few are based on the classic *Wolfenstein* enemies, but some are completely new.



INSIGHT
Several key members of the Swedish developer Starbreeze Studios, who created *The Chronicles Of Riddick: Escape From Butcher Bay* and *The Darkness*, founded MachineGames.

WOLFENSTEIN: THE NEW ORDER

While the screenshots look a little po-faced, the studio promises that it'll deliver the same outlandish action that the original classic delivered. No confirmation on robo-Hitler, though.

Wolfenstein runs on the id Tech 5, first used in *Rage* and will later be utilised for *The Evil Within* and *Doom 4*.

“WE WERE INSPIRED BY OTHER PROJECTS SUCH AS INGLOURIOUS BASTERDS AND DISTRICT 9, WHICH ALSO WALK THE TIGHT ROPE BETWEEN OVER-THE-TOP ACTION, COMEDY AND HONEST DRAMA”
JENS MATTHIES, MACHINEGAMES

■ Going against the grain of the modern FPS, *Wolfenstein* will not feature multiplayer. It's a bold step and we support the developer's decision to focus its time and resources into making a compelling single-player campaign.

BEST OF THE REST

BAYONETTA 2



Slated as a Wii U exclusive, *Bayonetta 2* is set to launch at some point in 2014 (although no-one seems to have any idea when). Platinum Games is listening closely to fan feedback from the original *Bayonetta* in hopes to bring improvements to the sequel, though the team will be without original game director Hideki Kamiya.

THE ORDER: 1886



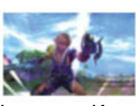
Apparently having been in development since 2010, *The Order: 1886* is a PlayStation 4 exclusive that looks like it's half-game, half tech-demo. The destructive effects on textures and materials all respond with a degree of realism we're not used to seeing on console titles; everything from wood to flesh comes apart like it should.

BLAZBLUE: CHRONOPHANTASMA



The PS3-exclusive fighting game will launch in America in March, hopefully meaning a release over here shortly after. It will continue past the events of *Continuum Shift* and add a new mechanic called Overdrive – a super move increasing in power depending on how low your health is.

FINAL FANTASY X / X-2 HD REMASTER



The Vita and PS3 releases of *Final Fantasy X / X-2* look like they've been recreated from scratch to suit the PS3. Every character model has been worked on individually, and even the HUD has received a makeover. Over 60 tracks from the OST have been remixed, too – this is a comprehensive remaster.

KINGDOM HEARTS HD 2.5 REMIX



Much like the *1.5 Remix* before it, this package will include three separate instalments of the *Kingdom Hearts* series, coming together to form a sort-of second chapter of the overall story. The collection will pull together *KHII Final Mix*, *KH Birth By Sleep Final Mix* and a cinematic repurposing of scenes from *KH Re:coded* on 3DS.

INSIGHT

BROKEN AGE

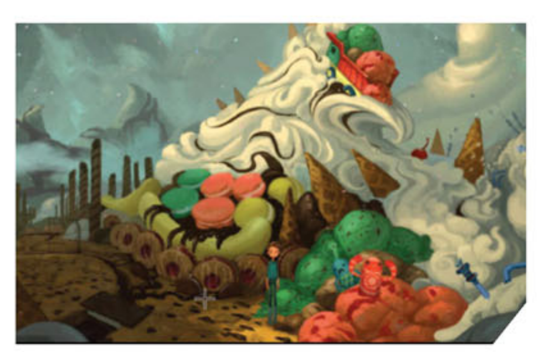
The split-screen image of Shay and Vella represents one of Schafer's earliest ideas for *Broken Age*: "On the first day of brainstorming I sketched that in my book. It's now the opening screen for the game."

■ Schafer explains the 2D characters are "made of pieces that flow together but they still deform, so they stretch and stuff."

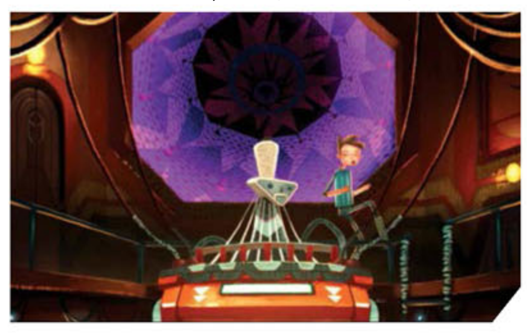
BROKEN AGE

THE NINETIES MEET IN TIM SCHAFER'S CROWD-FUNDED ADVENTURE GAME

Format: PC, iOS, Mobile **Publisher:** Double Fine Productions **Developer:** In-house **Release date:** January



■ The voice cast includes celebrities like Jack Black, *Adventure Time* creator Pendleton Ward, and Elijah Wood (who's also a backer).



■ Vella meets members of a cult of lightness who strive to remove unnecessary baggage from their lives, including letters of their names.

■ This month an early access version of *Broken Age*'s first half is releasing on the official website and Steam, with the remainder following this summer. Why the split? After his Kickstarter windfall, Schafer started regarding *Broken Age* as a 'real' adventure, "something that would live up to Grim Fandango or Full Throttle," he explains. "When I was designing it, I realised to make this fit in the budget I would have to take this design I came up with and cut it in half. Then I thought about what the backers would think of that, and I didn't think it would sit well with them." Rather than scale back, Double Fine will fund *Broken Age*'s completion with cash reserves and early access sales.

Schafer's first adventure since 1998 is "a parallel story about a young boy and a young girl coming of age, and they're dealing with different types of struggles against the expectations put on them by the societies they live in." The girl, Vella, "has been chosen for a great honour in her town, kind of like that Shirley Jackson story *The Lottery*, but it turns out the honour is to be sacrificed to the monster Mog Chothra." Vella's story is one Schafer has entertained for years: "I remember watching *King Kong* and thinking about Fay Wray all strapped in there and thinking what would I do if I were in that situation? I'd kick him in the nose or something. A story where a sacrificial girl did that seemed like a great opportunity to have someone overcome their situation."

Meanwhile the boy, Shay, is "being raised all alone on a spaceship by this over-mothering computer and starting to really buck against this overprotective cocoon he's been raised in. He decides to hack into the controls of the ship and take over, and that has consequences he has to deal with." This situation, too, is one that intrigues Schafer: "I love stories where you're isolated from all people but there are machines doing things for you, like at the end of *2001*."

While at LucasArts, Schafer approached each new game as an evolution, and the same is true of *Broken Age* "as if we'd kept making [adventures] since the old days but also improved our art and technology." The painted aesthetic relies on an engine developed specifically for this game: "There are moments of great parallax where you're going into depth, you're flying through the clouds and it has a great 3D feel to it, but it's still 2D. It's done out of a love of painting and the way painted stuff looks."

INSIGHT

In *Super Smash Bros. Brawl*'s Pokémon Stadium's ice form you can spot a picture of a white kitten inside a shack. It's believed this is Masahiro Sakurai's kitten.

SUPER SMASH BROS

A GUARANTEED HIT

Format: Wii U, 3DS **Publisher:** Nintendo **Developer:** Sora Ltd, Namco Bandai **Release date:** TBC

AMONG THE VERITABLE deluge of new information, screenshots and unveilings for the next instalment of *Super Smash Bros* you'd be forgiven for overlooking the simple fact that the Wii U sequel offers the first high definition rendering of some of Nintendo's most cherished mascots. There's no denying that the roster of bug-eyed brawlers has never looked better; just take a look at the glimmering armour of Samus, the individual hairs that create Fox's matted tail, or Kirby's, well, extra pinkness.

Thanks to series creator Masahiro Sakurai's constant updates, fans haven't had to wait long to see which other characters get the visual spiff job. We wouldn't expect any actual *new* characters to be revealed before E3 2014, given the nebulous 2014 release date that the title has been given suggests it'll arrive in the latter half of the year. Still, it's fun to speculate, and we'd wager our turnip stock that another classic *Sonic* series regular will make an appearance, while a more leftfield addition of Bayonetta – to coincide with the leather-clad heroine's Wii U exclusive sequel also due in 2014 – is almost guaranteed.

Sakurai, clearly fan of utilising all available social media outlets at his disposal, took to the Miiverse recently to reveal a *Mario Galaxy*-themed stage as one of the new battle arenas featured in the sequel. "The pull of gravity emanates from the centre of the planet, so this will require using brand-new tactics," he wrote alongside the debut of the first image of the stage. It falls in line with the director's promise that both the Wii U and 3DS versions will feature their own unique stages based on each platforms' lineage, with the *Mario Galaxy* level (modelled on one of the planets featured in the second game) tweaking the mechanics to offer a new perspective on the brawling.

> "BOTH THE WII U AND 3DS WILL FEATURE THEIR OWN UNIQUE STAGES"

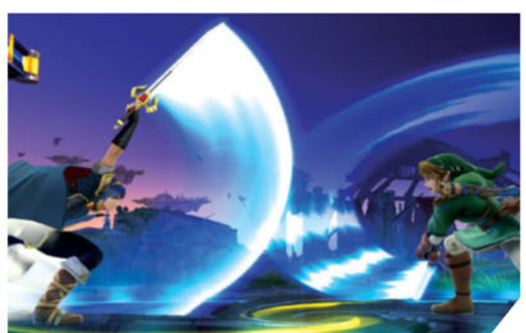
The exact extent of modifications made to the core mechanics has been one of the biggest talking points surrounding the sequel. Sakurai has stated that there won't be any substantial alterations aside from general balancing issues with characters, while it has been inferred that the Wii U's biggest innovation, the GamePad, is one of the least practical control methods available to the player. Not that any of this gives much cause for concern. The focus appears to be on making it the best possible iteration on what has come before, which includes establishing a more robust online experience and developing a single-player campaign that's actually worth playing for more than just the character unlocks.

But, if nothing else, it's assured to be the best-looking and slickest version of the same game you've been playing for years. And, quite frankly, there's not a huge amount wrong with that.

Fire Emblem's Marth was the latest character to be revealed, joining 18 confirmed characters to date. Sakurai has previously said that the roster won't be bigger than *Brawl*'s roster of 35.



Sonic returns but we'd put money on Dr. Robotnik making an appearance. The hero/villain balance in *Smash Bros.* roster has always been a little lop-sided.



The *Mario Galaxy* level demonstrates how gorgeous a *Galaxy* game would look on Wii U, though Miyamoto says there are no plans for this at present.

MARIO KART 8

THE RACE TO SAVE WII U

Format: Wii U **Publisher:** Nintendo **Developer:** In-house **Release date:** Q1

■ AT THE TIME of writing, the PlayStation 4 has been on sale for little more than a month and already it has outsold the worldwide sales of the Wii U. Now more than ever Nintendo is relying on the strength of its core franchises to reignite consumer interest in its floundering console and the next six months will bring several releases crucial to the system's future.

Mario Kart 8 is chief among these. Outlined as one of the more broadly commercial exclusives to date, the sequel is set to slide onto the Wii U early in the year and while it's not a major departure from its predecessor it does introduce a few new tricks to expand the core gameplay.

Clearly Mario has grown fond of lopping around in outer space as anti-gravity is the most prominent enhancement to the traditional kart racing. It's certainly the most literal way Nintendo has turned the franchise on its head in recent years, but it's also the most exciting. Tracks now twist into vast loops, intense drops and snaking bends, evoking the sense that you've just strapped yourself in to the most colourful rollercoaster ride ever.

The spectacle doesn't just end with the creative track design either, with *Mario Kart 8* displaying some of the most impressive visual tricks the Wii U has to offer. Indeed, the full gamut of the Mushroom Kingdom's versatile environments look better than ever, from the familiar green hills that surround Peach's Castle, to a nebulous Aztec setting and through to the more abstract courses.

Only time will tell whether *Mario Kart* can give the Wii U a much-needed boost into wider adoption, but, despite the responsibility resting on its shoulders, it's sure to be a success in its own right. The best *Mario Kart* ever? You'd better believe it.

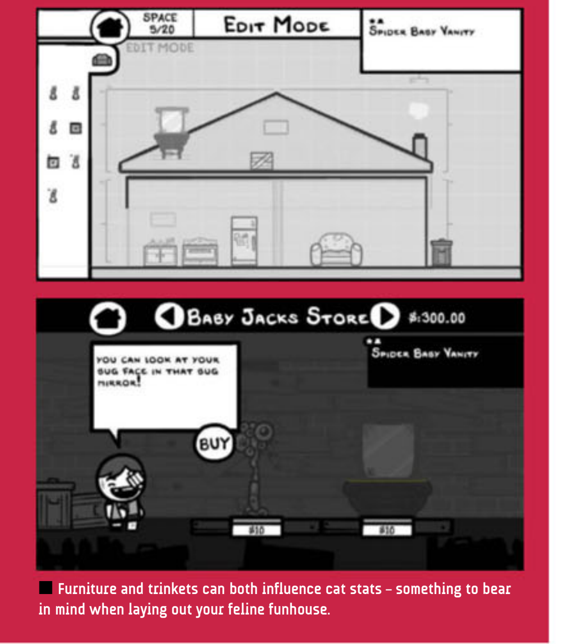
MEW-GENICS

YEAH, THAT'S A LOT OF CATS

Format: TBC **Publisher:** Team Meat **Developer:** In-house **Release date:** 2014

■ IT SHOULD COME as little surprise that the gaming world is following the new game from the *Super Meat Boy* dev duo pretty closely. But what *is* surprising is just what that new game is. Dubbed a 'crazy cat lady simulator', *Mew-Genics* is a dark and playful fusion of about 8 million different genres, covering everything from *Animal Crossing* and *The Sims* to *Borderlands* and *Pokémon*. Basically, you get some cats, breed them and do stuff with them – pageants, battles, races and God knows what else. You'll be playing Cat God all this time, pulling the strings to make sure that the eventual offspring of any two kitty pals will share the best traits of each. This is a Team Meat game, however, so it's likely that your experiment will result in a sad triangle cat with flippers and trust issues.

We're not talking about a few different types of cat, either. Team Meat is promising 'over 12,207,031,250,000,000,000,000' cats, though the final number will be so high that it may as well be an infinite amount – look, shape, traits, stats and more all play a part, passed on (to some extent) to offspring to help those trying to breed the ultimate cat to achieve their goal. If you've ever played *Animal Crossing* and wondered how much you'd like to take a syringe to your neighbours and genetically force them together to see what would happen, then congratulations – you have a new favourite game.



■ Furniture and trinkets can both influence cat stats – something to bear in mind when laying out your feline funhouse.



THE EVIL WITHIN

THE HORROR, THE HORROR

Format: PC, PS3, PS4, Xbox 360, Xbox One **Publisher:** Bethesda **Developer:** Tango Gameworks **Release date:** TBC

WHAT MAKES A successful survival horror title? Aficionados need only answer with a name: "Shinji Mikami". After nearly a decade away from haunted villages, contorted creatures and claustrophobic corridors, it's fair to say that the venerated developer's comeback title, *The Evil Within*, has been met with a feverish anticipation. The better question to ask is: can the *Resident Evil* creator – nay, the father of survival horror – return the genre to its former glory?

At this point, it's almost impossible to answer. We've seen the game in action and so far everything points towards the same creeping terror and permeating dread that helped launch his career in the first place, but there's also not much evidence to suggest he's stretching himself creatively beyond many of the tropes and clichés that he established at the launch of his career. We've watched as Detective Sebastian Castellanos tentatively ambles down an ominous, narrow corridor, the silver moonlight pouring through giant arch windows on one side of the hallway, while the odd abject article offers a bleak allusion to previous horrors. It's still an effective construction; you know what's coming but it does little to diminish the potency of the scare.

> "ITS TRUMP CARD IS THE EXTENT TO WHICH IT PLAYS MIND GAMES"

But where the setting and cinematic devices on the surface lack any obvious originality, it's below the surface that Mikami has sought to find inspiration. The AI is intelligent, meaning that it'll adapt to your play style during the campaign. Even smarter, on repeated the playthroughs, you might not find enemies located in the same place. The whole idea suggests that players will have little horror sandboxes to navigate through during each chapter.

It makes sense too. Where *Dark Souls* has garnered enormous acclaim for its ability to instil fear through a punishing trial-and-error approach, Mikami is doing the exact opposite aiming for the same result. *The Evil Within*'s trump card is the extent to which it plays mind games with the player, constantly implanting a sense of vulnerability core to the title's principal themes.

What's clear is that Mikami isn't quite ready to show his hand just yet. Whereas Resident Evil took players by surprise, the director – like an ageing rock star performing a reunion tour – seems to be doing everything to show gamers what they want to see. If this is to be Mikami's swan song, then we suspect that all this pre-release familiarity could just be one last masterful deception from the helmsman.

The opening of the game takes place in an asylum before spreading into the surrounding city.



All hope lies on Mikami to resuscitate the moribund survival horror genre.

As Shinji Mikami fans know all to well, there's nothing quite as scary as a mutilated creature wielding a chainsaw.

INSIGHT

Shinji Mikami has stated that *The Evil Within* will be his last title as director. However, the survival horror title will not mark the end of his career in the industry - he'll continue to produce in the future.

THE EVIL WITHIN

WATCH DOGS

WE'RE BETTER CONNECTED

Format: Multi **Publisher:** Ubisoft **Developer:** In-house **Release date:** Early 2014

ANOTHER UBISOFT GAME, another delay. The open world action-adventure game, set in Chicago, promises to be a scathing study of cybersocial mentality and a sobering look at the impact modern technology is having on our collective lives. Taking to the streets as Aiden Pierce, a genius hacker, *Watch Dogs* will take players on a journey brimming with political intrigue, information warfare and privacy invasion. Your goal, as Aiden, is to hack anything and everything; from ATMs to traffic lights, if it's got a digital interface, you can manipulate it. The game will include a morality system, but not in the traditional 'this is good/this is evil' sense – it's much more fluid than that; there's a lot more grey.

Aiden has the ability to break into personal computers, for example, and choose to tap the funds of Chicago's citizens. Some of these people – arsonists, corrupt officials and so on – are fair game, while others – single mothers, exploited workers – offer more of a moral quandary. Your actions throughout the world will be reflected in the public's response to you; behave yourself, and you'll achieve a kind of Robin Hood status, where people celebrate your vigilante actions. Use your powers selfishly, and you'll incur the wrath of the general populace. *Watch Dogs* seems very ambitious, and we find its delay completely understandable – if it pulls off the complex open world and integrated multiplayer it's advertising, then we think it'll be more than worth the wait. The game is now due for release in Q2 2014, and with *Assassin's Creed IV* and *GTA V* already out of the way, our hunger for open-world games will be ready to be satiated again by then.

SOUTH PARK: THE STICK OF TRUTH

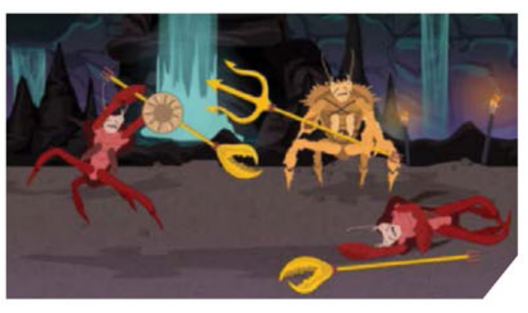
FRIENDLY FACES EVERYWHERE

Format: PC, PS3, 360 **Publisher:** Ubisoft **Developer:** Obsidian Entertainment **Release date:** 7 March

WILL THIS GAME ever come out? We hope so, because it looks like the definitive interactive *South Park* experience. All the cutscenes and gameplay look like they could have been taken straight from an episode of the foul-mouthed, crudely animated show. With Trey Parker and Matt Stone providing the script and the voices, you know this will be a legitimate *South Park* experience.

Parker and Stone have publicly criticised past efforts at turning their show into a game, but with *The Stick Of Truth* receiving the RPG treatment from Obsidian Entertainment (the developer behind *Fallout: New Vegas* and *Neverwinter Nights 2*), we reckon the title will live up to the creative duo's high expectations. What we've seen of the game seems to be a fond pastiche and loyal homage to classic fantasy RPGs; all the tropes are there, enacted in typical *South Park* satire – you can call on supporting cast members for special moves, cast spells by farting and each of the show's central kids will fulfil the role of a traditional RPG class (our favourite has to be Jimmy Bulmer's stammering Bard).

The game is set to release, tentatively, on 7 March – almost a year later than the original launch was planned. We can't hold the delays against Obsidian or Ubisoft, though – the fact the game has been so consistently put back shows a clear passion for the product, and we'd much rather have a polished, comprehensive *South Park* experience than a cheap cash-in.



The expansive mythos of the *South Park* world will be explored in *The Stick Of Truth* – everything from the Crab People (pictured) to Goth Kids, Underpants Gnomes and even the Ginger Kids. You've been warned.



The transition from cartoon to videogame doesn't seem to have cost *South Park* any of its, erm, racial sensitivity.



PLANTS VS ZOMBIES: GARDEN WARFARE

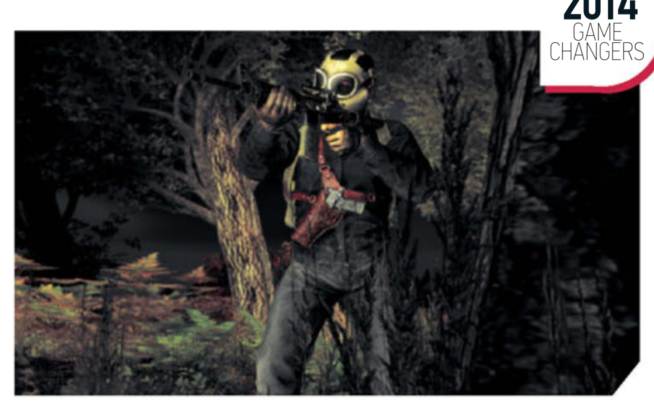
WILL POPCAP'S ESTABLISHED FRANCHISE TAKE ROOT IN A NEW GENRE?

Format: PC, Xbox 360, Xbox One **Publisher:** EA **Developer:** PopCap **Release date:** 20 February

THE WINDOWS PLATFORM timed exclusive is set to launch in February and has had the team here at **games™** asking a serious question… why is PopCap making a third-person shooter? The studio responsible for the original *Plants Vs Zombies* games, as well as *Peggle*, seems better suited at 2D puzzle-cum-tower-defence games than traditional third-person shooters, so to say we're dubious about this game is an understatement. We trust PopCap, though – time and again the developer has proved it can make solid, polished games, and maybe branching out into another genre is just going to galvanise its developmental skills even further. The game will feature competitive and cooperative online modes, will be online-only and have a capacity of 24-players per match.

Classes will be made up from the most notable plants and zombies from the previous two games; each will have a primary skill that corresponds to their appearance and ability in the previous titles. Interestingly enough, the game is powered by Frostbite 3 – the same engine used for *Need For Speed: Rivals* and *Battlefield 4* – so you can expect it to look pretty.

With 12 plants and 12 zombies running around on every map, we're expecting the gameplay to be frenetic; quick kills, quick respawns and a reliance on kamikaze tactics. The Xbox One version will allow you access to Boss Mode – a feature that will grant players the opportunity to play as either Crazy Dave or Doctor Zomboss (voiced by Russell Brand) and rain havoc on the enemies on the field from on high. Whether this will be an interesting use of Kinect/SmartGlass or more gimmick than game-changer is yet to be seen, but publisher EA has upped its game recently, and that gives us reason to hope for the best.



Hall warns that the alpha version released on Steam Early Access won't be for everyone, as it'll feature bugs, placeholder systems and missing features.



DAYZ

THE DEAD RISE AGAIN

Format: PC **Publisher:** Bohemia Interactive **Developer:** In-house **Release date:** TBA

"IT'S BEEN PRETTY tough for the last couple of months," admits *DayZ* creator Dean Hall as he explains the standalone version's tireless journey towards alpha. "There have been many times we thought we were very close, only to discover something else we needed to change. The year has seen us radically modify the engine, removing hundreds of thousands of lines of code drastically altering how it works for *DayZ*. While this is good news, as it mean's we're getting a custom built engine to meet *DayZ*'s needs – it has been a risky and troublesome process."

Anyone who thought that transforming the *DayZ* into a separate product would be a simple case of printing off a few disks might be surprised to find that Hall and his team have not just revamped the original *Arma 2* mod but instead embarked on a complete redevelopment.

"I think the hardest part has been making the tough, at times unpopular, decisions," says Hall. "It's a very scary and risky proposition and at times it looked like we might fail catastrophically. It's a huge undertaking to redo an entire engine in 12 months, the engine is over one million lines of code – there are huge dependencies and complexity. So even internally sometimes we have felt great desires just to cut corners and be done with it. It can be very hard to explain to someone who really wants to play, that we have to take the time now and set the architecture properly."

Indeed, and as we speak to him Hall is putting the finishing touches to the alpha build, which released on Steam last month. It's a crucial point in the project's gestation with the Alpha's success determining the future of the previously mooted console release of *DayZ*.

"We have definite interest in consoles, but only once the design has been worked through on the PC," reveals Hall. "I would really hate to see the PC experience get altered simply to provide cross platform support. The base engine has already compiled for the Xbox 360 previously, so we know its possible. *DayZ* is fortunate in that it is a much more specific experience than *Arma* and generally doesn't need as big a view distance – so it's actually much easier for us to make the leap to consoles than our big brother *Arma 3*."

INSIGHT

MIDDLE-EARTH: SHADOW OF MORDOR

Revealed with a big red 18 certificate from PEGI slapped across its placeholder box art, this is the first game set within Tolkien's Middle-earth to receive such a high age rating.

MIDDLE-EARTH: SHADOW OF MORDOR

THE WORLD IS CHANGING

Format: Multi **Publisher:** WB Games **Developer:** Monolith Productions **Release date:** TBA 2014

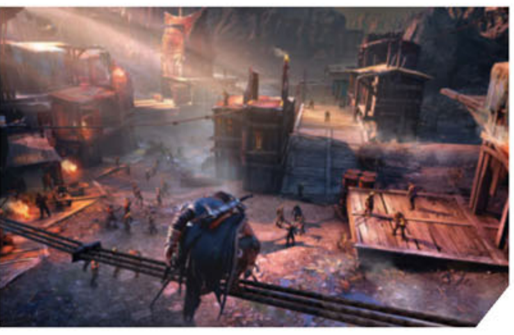
"DEATH AND THE human desire for immortality are key themes of Middle-earth lore," Michael de Plater, director of design at Monolith Productions tells **games™**. "Part of what is so compelling about [Tolkien's books] is the extent to which they explore darkness."

Set in the gap between *The Lord Of The Rings* and *The Hobbit*, *Middle-earth: Shadow Of Mordor* delves into the gothic and sinister undercurrents that tremor beneath the surface of Tolkien's most famous books. "There were many parts of the Middle-earth lore that inspired us," says de Plater. "One of our earliest inspirations was the idea of what would have happened if Boromir was successful in taking the One Ring from Frodo and using the weapon of the enemy against him. He would have become enslaved to it regardless of how noble his intentions were, and regardless of whether they were able to temporarily overcome and destroy Sauron. That is, he would have become a Wraith."

Stepping into the boots of Talion, a ranger whose family is slaughtered by Sauron's armies and a brush with the Dark Lord has endowed him with Wraith-like abilities. The road to Mordor is long and a huge portion of Middle-earth is available to explore freely, while gameplay and some story facets hinge on your own personal style – the verticality to the world invites a degree of versatility to combat scenarios.

This is demonstrated further in the innovative Nemesis System, which creates a compelling dynamic between players and other characters encountered throughout the game world. "We're certainly trying to bring something new to action games," explains de Plater. "These antagonists do more than just read player inputs, they remember the player's interactions with them – and their interactions with each other and the world.... Focusing on next gen and thinking about what we could do that was really exciting and new was certainly an inspiration for the Nemesis System. It required us to push in multiple areas – obviously in terms of AI, but also in graphics, audio and even level and world design. In short, it allows each player to have unique personal enemies that remember, react and respond to interactions with them."

Players can expect to bump into a few familiar faces. "There are recognisable characters who are very central to our story," reveals de Plater, "and others who appear in cameos. We confirmed Gollum will be part of the game and more characters will be revealed."



The verticality of the environments lends *Shadow Of Mordor* an *Arkham*-series vibe. Players can stalk enemies from above before strategically taking them out one-by-one.



There's not a lot of information about how the protagonist's Wraith powers will manifest in the game, but we're told there is a skill tree mechanic.





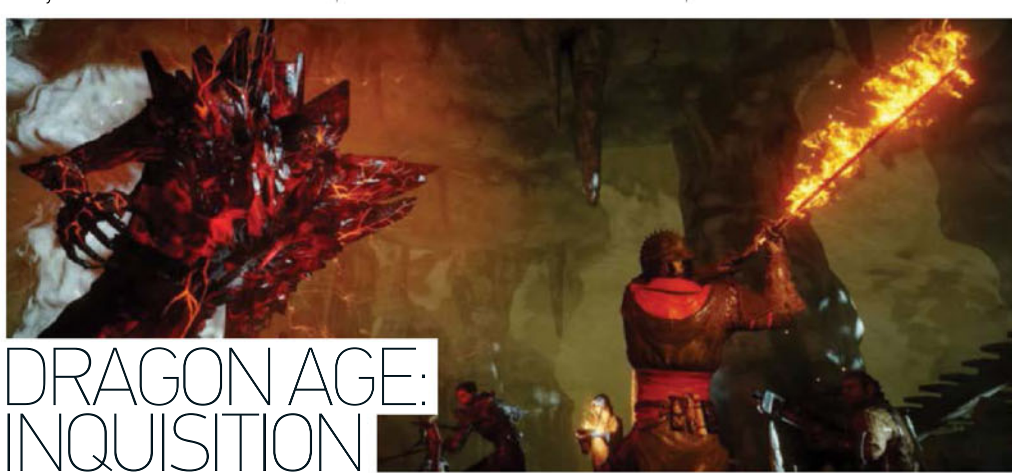
■ Playing *Ground Zeroes* will unlock something in *The Phantom Pain*. Kojima just won't say exactly what, the swine.

METAL GEAR SOLID V

KEPT YOU WAITING, HUH?

Format: Multi **Publisher:** Konami
Developer: Kojima Productions **Release date:** 20 March/TBA 2014

■ KOJIMA'S LATEST WILL come in two parts, *Ground Zeroes* being the starter while *The Phantom Pain* plays the role of main course. *Ground Zeroes* picks up shortly after the events of *Peace Walker*, with Big Boss hunting down Paz and Chico in Camp Omega. Fears about how much content will be in *Ground Zeroes* have led many to take issue with its £29.99 price tag, but we're more annoyed that *Metal Gear Solid V* has spoilered itself; we know Snake will fall into a coma at the end of *Ground Zeroes*, and we know from *The Phantom Pain* that this involves Snake losing a limb. The argument for having the two games exist as separate parts of a whole was to ease players into open-world stealth – *Assassin's Creed* anyone? – but now Kojima is suggesting that it comes down to how long we're going to have to wait between starter and main. *Ground Zeroes* is pencilled in for 20 March but at this point, we wouldn't put money on *The Phantom Pain* making 2014 at all. It's simply too ambitious a project to be rushed, and there's no precedent – open-world games have run one of two ways so far, and neither the open-ended RPG approach of *Skyrim* and co nor the city-wide crime wave of *GTA* is close to the idea of opening up *MGS*' sneaking to take stealth to a whole new level.



DRAGON AGE: INQUISITION

THE WORLD IS CHANGING

Format: Multi **Publisher:** EA **Developer:** BioWare **Release date:** TBA 2014

■ *INQUISITION* SEEMS TO want to take back the design philosophy of *Origins* – opting for open-ended storytelling, departing the constrictive narrative structure of *Dragon Age II*. The four-party system makes a return, alongside the customisable third-person perspective – the whole aesthetic of the game feels very *Origins*, a feature we welcome.

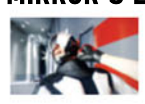
The game will feature many notable characters from the previous two games and seems to focus on a narrative larger than the previous two titles' faction warfare between mages and Templars. Much like *Assassin's Creed IV* with its sea forts and *Far Cry* with its garrisons, the open world parts of *Inquisition* will have to be secured by conquering fortresses which then allow players to recruit agents (think *Assassin's Creed: Brotherhood*) that can be set tasks to build up each fortresses' overall utility.

The game is built in the Frostbite engine – the very same tech powering the gorgeous *Battlefield 4*. The Frostbite engine comes with more than just eye-watering graphical fidelity; it also brings destructible environments and incredible draw distances. We think *Dragon Age: Inquisition* is going to be the first in a long line of unbelievably good-looking, realistic RPGs powered by Frostbite this generation.

If you're not particularly excited about *Inquisition* itself, you should still keep a close eye on this game – it's more or less a tech demo that will show off just what the Frostbite engine can do, and we're anticipating great things from it.

2015 GAMES

MIRROR'S EDGE 2



A sequel to 2008's dark horse *Mirror's Edge*, *Mirror's Edge 2* is confirmed as being in development by DICE, and will focus on protagonist Faith's origins in a city with 'an unprecedented level of freedom of action and movement'. Sounds like it'll be open world, right? That'll look gorgeous in the Frostbite Engine…

STAR WARS: BATTLEFRONT



Due for a release around the same time as *Star Wars Episode VII*, the rebooted *Battlefront* will be built in Frostbite 3 – we're expecting it to just be a *Battlefield* game but with *Star Wars* weapons and vehicles. Not that that's a bad thing – in fact, that's exactly what this game *needs* to be.

FINAL FANTASY XV



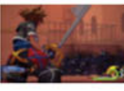
The first *Final Fantasy* game on next-gen promises to take the series back to its roots, but is also a self-confessed departure from the traditional battle systems the franchise is known for. *FFXV* seems to be a curious hybrid of action-RPG and hack-n-slash, revolving around a story heavily inspired by *Hamlet*…

DEUS EX: UNIVERSE



Pencilled in for a PC, PS4 and Xbox One release, *Deus Ex: Universe* will be beyond a game, focusing on creating an expansive franchise across mobile phones, graphic novels and books. The franchise looks like it'll study trans-humanism segregation and a longing for the golden days of the 'Cyber Renaissance'.

KINGDOM HEARTS III



The third numbered instalment of the oddball *Final Fantasy*/Disney mashup will be the first to grace a Microsoft console, and will serve as the final chapter in the series' Dark Seeker storyline. This will be the eighth instalment of the franchise, and according to Square Enix, will feature worlds based on new Disney properties. (Like Marvel? Fingers crossed.)





New protagonist Yaiba Kamikaze bears just enough resemblance to Ryu Hayabusa to not make it feel as though he has come completely out of left field, but the inclusion of cybernetic implants and glowing red-eyes is unlikely to sit well with purists.

EXECUTION

In order to earn weapons you must perform an 'execution' when a zombie's health is low; simply continuing to hack away until it dies results in the chance of a new weapon going with it. Initiating an execution triggers a very simple QTE that tasks you with tapping a random button as many times as possible within a time limit, the more taps you register the longer the weapon lasts.

YAIBA: NINJA GAIDEN Z

BEYOND THE IMAGINABLE

KEIJI INAFUNE EXPLAINS HOW YAIBA: NINJA GAIDEN Z AIMS TO EXPAND THE FRANCHISE'S AUDIENCE WITHOUT ALIENATING FANS

Format: Multi **Publisher:** Tecmo Koei **Developer:** Team Ninja, Spark Unlimited, Comcept **Release date:** 28 February

We're sitting in a nondescript Central London boardroom face-to-face with the legend himself. We're talking to Keiji Inafune about his latest game, a game that is "beyond the imaginable" in terms of storyline and boss battles, a game trying to stay (somewhat) true to its illustrious roots while assuming significantly wider appeal. To say *Yaiba: Ninja Gaiden Z* is unlike anything the Ninja Gaiden series has provided so far would be a gross understatement.

Other than a cameo appearance from former long-time protagonist Ryu Hayabusa, dramatically convoluted dialogue and the fact that your character wields a sword, there's seemingly little to connect *Yaiba* with its predecessors. Crushing difficulty, tactical combat and limited resources were all staples of *Ninja Gaiden*'s past. However, Inafune explains that franchises can't simply rely on providing the same established elements for each new release and expect to attain more success.

"The gaming audience is broadening all the time, with new kinds of people playing games and talking about games," Inafune tells us. "Back in the NES and SNES era, gamers used to fall into much tighter categories and it was easier to appeal to them. Now we have new people becoming gamers that have no experience with the medium whatsoever, that constant change makes it quite difficult to appeal to the general audience. It means we can't just bring out a new title in the same style of gameplay that existed when the series was first released, we must analyse what people liked about the original style and how we can make that work today."

Interestingly, Inafune likens the approach he and his team are taking with Yaiba to Hollywood, rather than to the games industry: "If you look at movies, the likes of *Superman*, *Star Trek* and *Batman*, for example, we're seeing a revival of »





Yaiba's 'Flail' weapon is less powerful than his sword, but is the quickest and safest way to take on zombies huddled together in groups.



SURVIVAL

Successful executions also refill a small chunk of your health bar, making it a vital tool for survival given that the volume of enemies make it almost impossible to survive battles unscathed.

The new visual approach is immediately striking, creating an exaggerated sense of chaos and carnage that can make combat difficult.

» those brands that are heavily adjusted to appeal to a modern audience. I think that's the approach that Japanese developers need to take and we're trying to do that [for *Yaiba*]."

The "heavily adjusted", Hollywood-compared revival takes on even more significance in *Yaiba*'s case given that the game's development is being handled by Californian-based Spark Unlimited, the same company responsible for *Lost Planet 3* and *Legendary*. Following the release of the abomination that was *Ninja Gaiden 3*, Spark's development history is hardly one that inspires confidence regarding the future of the franchise and its potential to once again find a place for itself among gaming's elite. Having a Japanese franchise built by a Western developer is hardly a new idea, of course. Inafune's former employer Capcom has an especially broad history in the area, utilising the skills of Swedish team Grin for 2009's *Bionic Commando* and its prelude *Bionic Commando: Rearmed*, while *Dead Rising 2* and *3* are the work of Canada's Blue Castle Games (since renamed Capcom Vancouver). Not to mention Spark's own aforementioned involvement in *Lost Planet 3*.

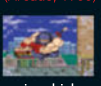
The results of such collaborations have been inarguably mixed, success and failure arriving in roughly equal quantities. Inafune, though, is keen to dismiss the idea that *Yaiba* is simply a Western product, that *Ninja Gaiden* is being taken out of Japanese hands. While Spark is handling development duties, Inafune's own Comcept as well as series originators Team Ninja are heavily involved in all areas of design and in setting the game's core values. "The three studios are working very closely together, it's not a case of Comcept handling this part, Spark doing this and Team Ninja doing something else, but all three studios working in collaboration.

"If each of the three studios hadn't worked so closely, and helped each other with ideas and execution, I don't think we would have come this far and I don't think we could have as put as much into the game as we have now managed to do. We are three teams with our own ways of doing things when we work individually, but for *Yaiba* I feel we have really come together as one."

> "THERE ARE TITLES THAT I'VE WANTED TO WORK WITH, AND NINJA GAIDEN WAS ONE OF THOSE. FROM THE DAY I LEFT CAPCOM I KNEW THAT"
> KEIJI INAFUNE

A HISTORY OF VIOLENCE

NINJA GAIDEN
(Arcade, 1988)



Side-scrolling beat-'em-up in which you travel across the USA to stop a cult leader becoming king of the world. Forced you to fight mainly with your hands, the sword a limited-use power-up.

NINJA GAIDEN
(NES, 1988)

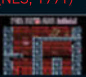


Brought us more depth on the character Ryu Hayabusa as protagonist. It's this edition that set the high difficultly threshold that would become a key feature for the series.

NINJA GAIDEN II: THE DARK SWORD OF CHAOS
(NES, 1990)

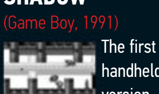
Added the ability not only to climb walls but also to create 'Spirit Clones', allies that would fight for you for a limited set time.

NINJA GAIDEN III: THE ANCIENT SHIP OF DOOM
(NES, 1991)



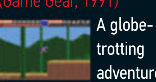
Increased damage received from enemy attacks and a limited number of continues made this arguably the most difficult in the series.

NINJA GAIDEN SHADOW
(Game Boy, 1991)



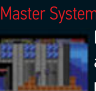
The first handheld version and prequel to the original game, featuring heavily simplified gameplay and a story based around saving New York City.

NINJA GAIDEN
(Game Gear, 1991)



A globe-trotting adventure which sees Ryu travel to India and Hong Kong in a bid to prevent World War III. The plotlines have always had something of the melodrama about them.

NINJA GAIDEN
(Master System, 1992)



Featured a story in no way connected to previous games in the series, breaking conventions again, although gameplay mechanics were largely unchanged from NES editions.

Coming together as one is a theme not only for *Yaiba*'s development background, but also for its content. Both gameplay and aesthetics are based on a combination of three typically detached themes – ninjas, zombies and cybernetics. Protagonist Yaiba Kamikaze is part man, part machine, but all ninja – symbolically hacked down by Ryu Hayabusa at the start of game, setting up a plot in which you literally set out to destroy the iconic hero of *Ninja Gaiden*'s past. Yaiba's various cybernetic limbs and implants are predominantly employed in the mowing down of zombie hordes, creating a core gameplay loop that is far closer to the likes of *God Of War* or *Dante's Inferno* than typical *Ninja Gaiden*. The focus here is on mass blood-letting rather than pitting your wits against any single, formidable opponent. Combine this with the broad, sharp lines of the new comic book-style visuals and here's a game that feels over-the-top and entirely offbeat at every juncture we've played so far.

"Was it difficult to combine those three factors (zombies, ninja and cybernetics)?" ponders Inafune. "No, it wasn't! We felt the combination really worked with the visual style we aimed for. Having all three of these elements really broadened what we were able to do and what kind of gameplay we could provide. It has really allowed us to express ourselves with lots of variations and lots of different things that constantly challenge the player and offers new visual touches regularly. I don't think the elements get in each other's way at all. They all work together to improve it."

> "COMING UP WITH THE IDEA FOR YAIBA: NINJA GAIDEN Z WAS ACTUALLY QUITE STRAIGHTFORWARD, SO I PRESENTED IT TO TEAM NINJA AND WE WORKED FORWARDS FROM THERE"
> KEIJI INAFUNE

What constitutes improvement is a case of personal preference, and Yaiba's take on combat will not suit those looking for a test of their input dexterity. Combos are flashier and fill the screen with impressive looking particle effects and no small amount of collateral damage, executing such devastating attacks performed by hitting any of the three attack buttons in virtually any order. Timing and precision has been replaced with mashing and a requirement to constantly stay on the offensive in a bid not to become overwhelmed by the sheer number of enemies present in any given encounter.

The result is that success in combat carries less gratification than it did before. Previous *Ninja Gaiden* games fixated on the micro-progression, the idea that each encounter would represent enough challenge to provide a sense of accomplishment upon clearing even the smallest area of a level. *Yaiba* is very much concerned with the bigger picture, that this accomplishment be sensed upon clearing a whole level or the entire game – each individual battle is meaningless upon reflection, no different to the others that came before or after it (we've played the first three levels).

Team Ninja head honcho and *Yaiba* producer Yosuke Hayashi is well aware of this distinction between *Yaiba* and the games that came before it, but he's adamant that it's no bad thing: "Working on the *Ninja Gaiden* brand does bring with it an expectation from gamers that we must make a difficult game. However, the core idea we had with *Yaiba: Ninja Gaiden Z* was to come up with a new central character in *Yaiba*. This means that the difficulty level wasn't of primary importance for us, instead it was focusing on this new style.

"We do fully understand that the *Ninja Gaiden* branding means a lot of people will expect a high level of difficulty and we didn't want to disappoint players. That's why we've built 'Ninja Gaiden Z mode', which is specifically aimed at the more hardcore players and those that are experienced with the series."

Ninja Gaiden Z mode is the concession to the long-time fan, then. The part of the *Yaiba: Ninja Gaiden Z* designed to pay homage to the roots and success of the franchise up to (and not including) the release of *Ninja Gaiden 3*. Like the earliest games in the series, Ninja Gaiden Z mode takes the form of a side-scrolling action game designed to be so difficult that the designers want "people to start throwing the controller around when they die again and again".

Although we weren't actually allowed to get hands-on with the full game, the idea is to recreate an arcade-style experience in which the player can spend a day sitting in front of the TV in a bid to complete the mode in a single sitting. Which is likely to be easier said than done, considering that death means you're forced back to the start of level one. "It's like having two games in one, really. The *Yaiba* side is the new approach, and the *Ninja Gaiden Z* mode is the more traditional experience that fans of the series will recognise," explains Hayashi. "We're still working on the exact details of the mode, but it's certainly not going to be a 50-hour game – that would be too much to expect players to start from the beginning if they reached the end and die. At the moment, and we're still working things out, the 10-hour mark to complete the whole thing sounds about right."

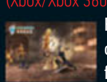
Yaiba: Ninja Gaiden Z is released on 28 February on PC, PlayStation 3 and Xbox 360.

UPGRADES

Defeating certain zombies allows you to wield their weapon for a limited time. Bridal zombies drop the long-reaching 'Spinal Twap' electrical whip, muscle-bound boxer zombies provide you with powerful 'Numb-Chucks' and tearing the head off a Holy Roaster rewards you with a 'Rigor Mortar' fire cannon.

Dismembering zombies doesn't always kill them, with certain types requiring you to destroy the legs and body after cutting their body in two.

NINJA GAIDEN
(Xbox/Xbox 360, 2004)

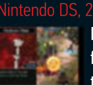


First of the fully 3D outings, this new generation *Ninja Gaiden* garnered significant critical acclaim and made designer Tomonobu Itagaki a legitimate star.

NINJA GAIDEN SIGMA
(PlayStation 3, 2007)

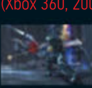
Basically an enhanced edition of the Xbox editions, featured HD visuals and extra playable character. PS Vita edition released in 2012.

NINJA GAIDEN: DRAGON SWORD
(Nintendo DS, 2008)



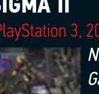
Played from a top-down perspective, *Dragon Sword* was played almost entirely via the touch screen, and received consistently high scores in reviews.

NINJA GAIDEN II
(Xbox 360, 2008)



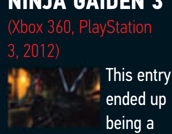
Set a year after the events of the first Xbox *Ninja Gaiden*, this sequel sees the introduction of a regenerating health bar. However smarter enemy AI makes sure difficulty is still high.

NINJA GAIDEN SIGMA II
(PlayStation 3, 2009)



Ninja Gaiden Sigma II was the updated edition of *Ninja Gaiden II*, featuring improved textures and resolution. PS Vita edition released in 2013.

NINJA GAIDEN 3
(Xbox 360, PlayStation 3, 2012)



This entry ended up being a much maligned release which saw the difficulty level drop drastically, replaced with a more cinematic approach to combat.

NINJA GAIDEN 3 RAZOR'S EDGE
(Xbox 360, PlayStation 3, Wii U, 2012)



Re-release of *Ninja Gaiden 3* that included all of the downloadable content. The Wii U edition included critically divisive touch screen controls.



MIA

A LOOK AT THE TITLES THAT HAVE SLIPPED OFF THE RADAR AND FADED INTO THE NEBULOUS MIST OF VIDEOGAME PURGATORY

HALF-LIFE 3

Developer: **Valve**
ETA: **2015**



■ VALVE HAS REMAINED tight-lipped about how it plans to continue the adventures of nerdy-scientist-cum-saviour Gordon Freeman, having a busy year of digital distributions, launching huge franchises and taking a detour into hardware development. What we do know is that the plot will link to the history of Aperture Laboratories (*Portal*'s scientific institute) and the fabled Borealis ship. Can we finally expect an announcement this year?

PREY 2

Developer: **TBC**
ETA: **2015**



■ THERE ARE GAMES that go through a tumultuous development and then there's *Prey 2*. The sequel to the game that almost nobody remembers is still an in-development project somewhere at Bethesda. The latest report is that Human Head Studios is off the project and that *Dishonored* developer Arkane Studios has taken over – a rumour that Bethesda's Pete Hines denied. Still, the original was an evocative shooter and if the sequel can push those concepts it'll be worth the wait.

1666

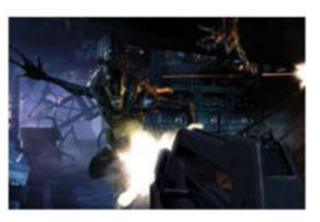
Developer: **Patrice Désilets**
ETA: **2016**



■ AFTER THE PUBLISHER acquired Désilets and his new IP, *1666 Amsterdam*, in the THQ fallout, Ubisoft then subsequently fired the developer and left his labour of love abandoned. Presumed to involve The Great Fire of London and described as "the next big thing" in the action adventure genre by Désilets himself, it was set to be another huge franchise that would rival *Assassin's Creed*. Whether or not Désilets regains the rights or Ubisoft will revive the project is unknown.

ALIEN

Developer: **The Creative Assembly**
ETA: **2014**



■ THE WORST KEPT secret in the games industry, The Creative Assembly has been working on another licenced game based on the *Alien* franchise for a few years now. Several reports have leaked out about the title, with most evidence pointing towards a survival horror game that's more in keeping with the original film's tone. After *Aliens: Colonial Marines* was savaged by critics earlier in the year, it's no wonder that Sega has chosen to remain quiet about this.

A ROCKSTEADY BATMAN GAME

Developer: **Rocksteady Studios**
ETA: **2014**



■ WHILE *BATMAN: ARKHAM Origins* was far from a bad game, it did pale in comparison to Rocksteady's previous efforts. Rumours have pointed towards a potential Justice League game, that'd see Batman teaming up with Superman and Wonder Woman, but nothing has been confirmed to date. Given that *Origins* released a year after *Arkham City*, it's probable that WB Games wants to go down the *COD* route and turn *Batman* into an annual commercial guarantee.

DOOM 4

Developer: **id Software**
ETA: **2015**



■ IT'LL BE A decade in August since *Doom 3* reimagined the classic shooter for a new generation and what better time to announce the arrival of the next chapter in the series? It might be something of a long shot, but it's been suggested that the game underwent a complete overhaul over the last couple of years and a batch of screenshots that leaked online in 2012 were debunked instantly by the studio, ensuring that when it's officially revealed it'll be awesome. We'd expect nothing less.

MASS EFFECT 4

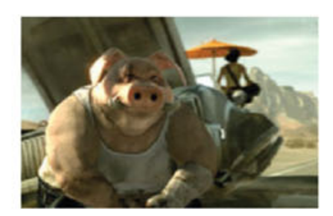
Developer: **BioWare**
ETA: **2015**



■ BIOWARE IS ONE of the few developers that is open about the projects that its developing. One of which is the next entry in the *Mass Effect* saga, the first few images of which the studio debuted towards the end of last year. The most intriguing aspect of the sequel is exactly how it plans to slot into the established canon. Now that the Commander Shepard trilogy is over, it gives the developer free rein to explore new facets of the rich mythology.

BEYOND GOOD & EVIL 2

Developer: **Ubisoft**
ETA: **2014**



■ WELL, WE COULDN'T not include this on our list. The most recent news is that Michel Ancel's long-awaited sequel is, in fact, quite far along in development and is targeting a launch on PlayStation 4, Xbox One and Wii U. That's a positive step for a title many assumed was abandoned. Ancel and his team are looking to expand on some of the original's unique features with an eye on a broader market to ensure that the sequel it met with better sales.

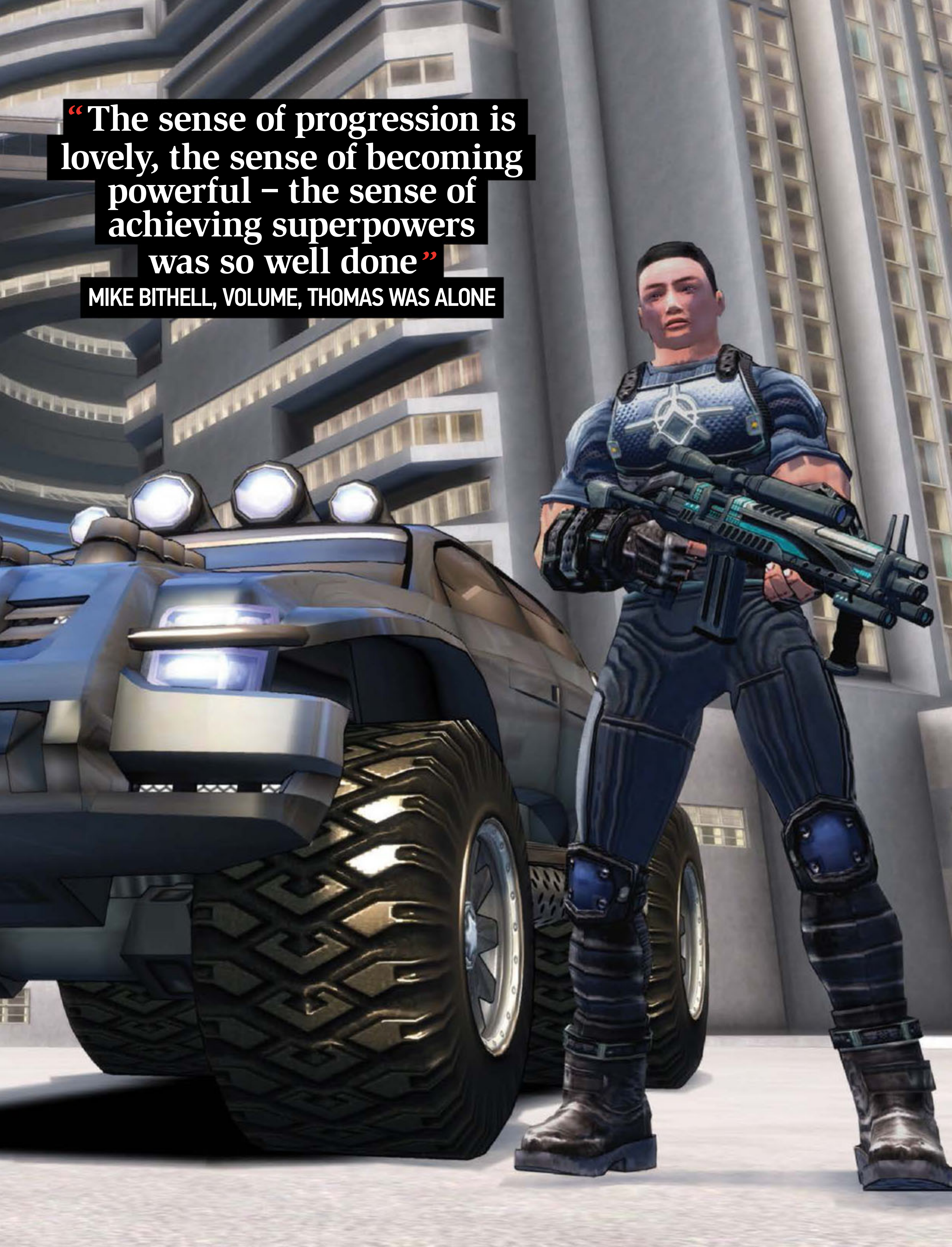


WHY I ❤...

Crackdown

MIKE BITHELL, VOLUME, THOMAS WAS ALONE

The original Crackdown *wasn't massively well-received, but I think it's the most fun I've ever had in a sandbox. The sense of progression is lovely, the sense of becoming powerful – the sense of achieving superpowers was so well done. I don't think any other game's done superpowers as cleverly as that game; the gradual build-up of starting out being able to throw tiny things, then moving on to throwing vans around – it's fantastic. The same with jumping and gliding. At its core,* Crackdown *was just a very good game.*


"The sense of progression is lovely, the sense of becoming powerful – the sense of achieving superpowers was so well done"
MIKE BITHELL, VOLUME, THOMAS WAS ALONE



SMARTGLASS:

MOBILE DEVICES HAVE BECOME EXCEEDINGLY PROMINENT IN OUR DAY TO DAY LIVES OVER THE LAST DECADE. **GAMES™** LOOKS AT HOW MOBILE COMPANION APPS HAVE INFILTRATED THE GAMES INDUSTRY AND QUESTIONS WHETHER OR NOT THEY'RE HERE TO STAY FOR THE NEW GENERATION AND BEYOND



REVOLUTION OR FAD?

You are Edward Kenway – Welshman, privateer, rogue. As you and your salty crew navigate the tempestuous seas of the Caribbean, you find yourself hopelessly lost. Somewhere between the isles of Jamaica and Tortuga you were ambushed by Her Majesty's Royal Navy and are now helplessly sailing around in circles trying to correct your course. You reluctantly pause *Black Flag* and look at the map, your previously unyielding immersion abruptly intruded upon.

There is potential that with the help of the recent influx of videogame companion apps, immersion-shattering instances such as this can be a thing of the past. No need for a map screen, no pausing to look up where collectable items are on the internet. *Assassin's Creed IV: Black Flag*'s bespoke companion app comes complete with a map of the game world that, when connected to your console or PC, shows you exactly where you are in real time and negates the need for you to interrupt your experience. You can even arrange your fleets using a phone or tablet.

This sort of efficiency and lifestyle awareness is a key function of mobile devices in the 21st Century. But in the games industry, for a companion app to justify its own existence surely it needs to augment its parent title's gameplay in some way, rather than just providing us with a game encyclopedia and a few statistics? We already know from looking at *Battlefield 4*'s companion app Battlelog courtesy of DICE and EA and its integration into online play via dynamic maps and Commander Mode that it is a possibility, but most of the applications that have arisen in recent times appear to be a little superfluous.

Perhaps the most publicised of these undercooked apps came in the form of iFruit, an app for *Grand Theft Auto V*. This extraneous attachment to perhaps the last great masterpiece of the outgoing generation was without any true substance. Yes, it allowed the user to train Chop the dog and customise vehicles while procrastinating at work, but it failed to extend the game's appeal with any meaningful purpose. It simply didn't need to exist. The recent companion app for *Call Of Duty: Ghosts* appears to offer little more than the ability to stick a new camouflage pattern on your weapon while you're sat on the bus – preferable to staring idly out of the window but still a fairly empty experience after a week or so of use. It appears that most of its functionality hasn't actually been rolled out yet.

Now, with the incumbent gaming generation, companion apps and SmartGlass functionality appear to be very much in vogue. Both first- and third-party publishers have begun to bring out iOS, Android and Windows Phone applications to inject their product line with some semblance of synergy and to broaden the horizons of their precious IP. Even the mighty purveyors of the two new mass-market consoles have deemed it appropriate to launch accompanying apps for their systems.

SmartGlass offers similar functions to the PlayStation App in that it can act as a remote control of sorts for browsing the console's menu architecture and can sync up with the console as a second screen. Microsoft very much has the edge with its app though, as SmartGlass actually provides its users with quantifiable, practical functionality when paired with select Xbox One titles – no more so than in *Dead Rising 3*.

"In *Dead Rising 3*, SmartGlass turns your phone into an extension of the game world. It becomes the phone in the game and opens up lines for you to interact with characters during gameplay – it's a cool bonus," intimates Xbox Live general manager Ron Pessner. "SmartGlass can start a new mission or find hidden in-game items and locations. In addition, by completing exclusive missions gamers can earn special rewards, like an airstrike that they can call in with Xbox One SmartGlass to clear an escape path if they're stuck in a zombie horde." *Dead Rising 3*'s SmartGlass support certainly represents a step in the right direction – a piece of software that neatly embellishes upon the gameplay of a popular title without being a prerequisite – though Pessner is quick to mention that the game's SmartGlass functions aren't necessary to finish the game.

"The gameplay-enhancing possibilities of Xbox SmartGlass are available to all developers working on Xbox One titles," explains Pessner. "They are fundamental parts of the Xbox One toolbox, and

APPALOOZA

How relevant to their source material are gaming's companion apps?



BATTLEFIELD 4

Pub: EA

■ Bucking the trend of peripheral FPS support amounting to little more than customising your loadout online, Battlelog allows the user to view a dynamic map of in-progress online battles and the supplementary Commander Mode app allows players to influence games by pinging the map, dishing out support packages and issuing orders to their teammates. One of the few apps that truly enhances your gaming prospects.

RELEVANCE RATING ★★★★☆



ASSASSIN'S CREED IV: BLACK FLAG

Pub: Ubisoft

■ The *ACIV* app offers players a lot in the way of convenience but is limited in terms of functionality. It'll certainly never be referred to as a necessity by its users, as despite the dynamic map's obvious benefits and its generally unobtrusive nature, it doesn't affect your gameplay in any way other than making the arranging of your fleets a little bit easier. It's also tied into a Uplay death-grip, which, let's be honest, nobody wants.

RELEVANCE RATING ★★★☆☆



CALL OF DUTY: GHOSTS

Pub: Activision

■ An odd one, as it hints at some genuine progression but still only really performs at the level you'd expect. There's the usual nod to on-the-go customisations and you're able to track your career stats, but it's heavily bogged-down in Clan actions which won't necessarily appeal to a lot of players. You can also choose classes with a swipe, but this will only shave a couple of seconds off the more traditional method.

RELEVANCE RATING ★★☆☆☆



NEED FOR SPEED RIVALS

Pub: EA

■ *Need For Speed Network* is the name of the game here, and once again it is potentially an interesting prospect. As well as its ability to turn into a map-based second screen, users can track their friends in real time and send bonuses their way in the form of nitrous refills and repairing their car. Or you can reduce your friendship to ashes by helping the rozzers throw your mates in the slammer.

RELEVANCE RATING

★★★★☆



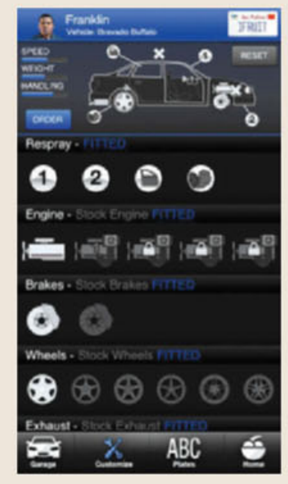
DEAD RISING 3

Pub: Microsoft

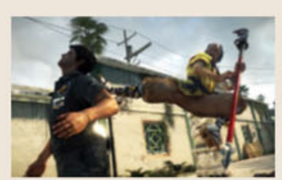
■ The SmartGlass support for *Dead Rising 3* is strong and functional, and truly represents companion app support at its most considered. By essentially transforming your phone or tablet into *Dead Rising*'s in-game mobile phone, characters can get in touch with you at certain points in the game and highlight collectables and extra missions. This is interactivity at its best – ambitious, reactive and governed by player choice.

RELEVANCE RATING

★★★★★



● *Grand Theft Auto V*'s slightly disappointing iFruit app. The ideas were there, but Rockstar failed to deliver an application with any real worth.



● *Dead Rising 3*'s SmartGlass support is second to none, even offering the user extra interactions with NPCs.

developers continue taking advantage of these opportunities to create gaming experiences unlike anything seen before. We're continuing to build the tools and resources necessary to empower more game developers and entertainment partners to create new and unique experiences that will make entertainment smarter, more interactive and more fun across the devices you already own."

What is still unclear, however, is how catering for SmartGlass support benefits development teams and enhances their creative potential. "SmartGlass is a platform that lets content providers bring innovative experiences to consumers," says Pessner. "Developers can build creative and fun new ways to bring their customers deeper into the game experience. We've added a new feature developers can integrate into their SmartGlass application called the Help button. If you're having trouble in a game, you can tap a Help button in SmartGlass that will give you contextually aware information for whatever you're playing."

This is a pertinent point, as it hints at interactivity that is more immediate than, say, playing a game and then using a laptop or your smart device's web browser to look up hints or information. By using SmartGlass and integrating it into their gaming routines, consumers have been provided with a peripheral medium that has the potential to enhance their experience in a meaningful and convenient way.

Ted Timmins, lead designer on *Fable Anniversary*, feels that companion app and SmartGlass support from mobile devices provides videogames with a new and innovative technological enhancement. "The benefit is turning these additional devices that tend to sit in your pocket or on the coffee table whilst you're playing into something useful and immersive," he offers. "We're in a world surrounded by incredible

> "DEVELOPERS CAN BUILD CREATIVE AND FUN NEW WAYS TO BRING THEIR CUSTOMERS DEEPER INTO THE GAME EXPERIENCE"

technology, with screens in your pocket that are more powerful than the PCs sat on your desk five years ago. I feel that we as game creators have a duty to help push new technology and SmartGlass is one way of doing that." This emphasis on innovation is key. As an extension to the development process, creating a companion app gives development teams even more ways to express their creativity.

Convenience is arguably the true elixir for any app, and how convenient or inconvenient it is for the consumer to use companion apps in tandem with the games they are playing will ultimately dictate whether they use them or not. It brings to mind the question of whether or not companion apps are merely pleasant diversions that offer little in the way of practical functions that are in line with the users' lifestyles and gaming preferences – it's telling that 'usefulness' appears to be the word on the mouths of many in the industry. What is also crying out for discussion as the medium waxes at the start of a new generation is how, if at all, SmartGlass and companion app support will benefit developers and publishers in financial terms. On the surface, the industry's intrepid new arrivals appear to add little or no revenue to a title's fiscal performance. Most, if not all of the companion apps available are free for consumers, as well as being – for



THE MODERN SHAPE

Five ways in which tablets can improve your games

CHARACTER DEVELOPMENT

1 Integrating stats, loudouts and more is already prominent across the FPS catalogue in the form of *COD* and *Battlefield*, but tablet integration could improve our interaction with player-characters across other genres too. This would be effective in RPGs, where players could monitor their character's stats and upgrades on a separate screen rather than pausing.

DYNAMIC MAPS

2 How much of a pain was it in *Skyrim* or the *Arkham* games to have to wait for the map to boot up just so you could ping something? The ability for the player to check an in-game map without having to pause will aid in player immersion and is far more convenient, allowing the player to truly concentrate on the game, common already in PC gaming.

FRIENDS LISTS

3 Something as basic as your Friends list available on a second screen while playing online is still beneficial, especially if it provides you with their in-game activity and you can invite them to join you from the second screen – once again it negates the need for unwieldy menu systems that affect your immersion. In online games, having this function may prevent you from being shot…

HELPING HAND

4 Ron Pessner mentioned that all SmartGlass developers have access to a 'Help' function. If a player were to get stuck then SmartGlass can provide them with information to give a push in the right direction. This could be hints, guides or in-game benefits to drag you out of the mess you've gotten yourself into. It's a feature that will certainly alienate some – bear in mind that it's totally optional.

CONTACT TIME

5 Having access to your games library, Friends list, Achievement or Trophy information and certain aspects of the games themselves is a wonderful thing to have in your pocket. Your marriage may suffer a little, but having all of these functions available to you in any environment extends your gaming experience into social environments and circumstances where it wouldn't usually venture.

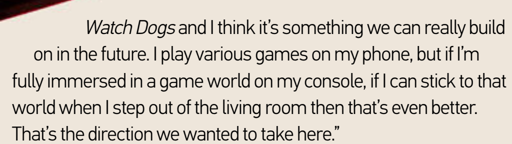
the most part – bereft of any outsourced advertising content that might afford a publisher extra revenue. Prominent videogames analyst Michael Pachter feels that companion apps only benefit publishers on a slightly more subliminal plane.

"Companion apps don't benefit publishers much," he tells us, "but have the potential to drive incremental sales if there are consumers who require prompting from their phones to remember to make a purchase." This infers that, even by just downloading a free companion app, consumers can be influenced by the software to make further purchases in the future. Pachter bolsters this view further by adding; "I would say [companion apps] are more effective marketing tools than sales tools."

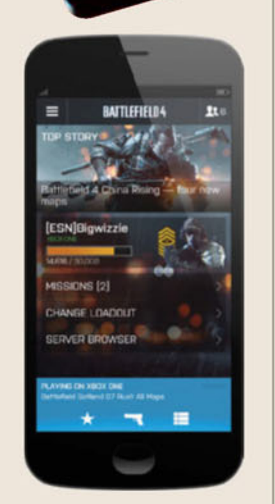
This perhaps goes some way towards explaining why the companion app has risen to prominence recently, and why publishers such as Ubisoft and Activision have invested time and money into products that are free on the App Store. It's because an app's role as an ongoing marketing tool will potentially proffer videogame publishers long-term income potential through increasing a particular IP's contact time with the consumer – without the need for the consumer to even play the game in question. They merely have to use their phone or boot up their tablet and there's the *ACIV* app, nestled neatly in the midst of their digital collection. This does, however, bring to mind some questions as to whether companion apps truly offer the consumer something worthwhile that will enhance their gaming experience, or merely subject them to a whisper of cloak-and-dagger capitalism.

The coming year offers us several approaches to smartphone and tablet support, especially when looking to high-concept and ambitious projects like *Watch Dogs* and *Tom Clancy's The Division*, both courtesy of Ubisoft. *Watch Dogs* in particular has, delay aside, steamrolled its way through a lengthy pre-launch marketing campaign that has highlighted the game's cross-functionality with tablets and smartphones at every juncture.

"We wanted you to be able to play on the train or in the car, and that presented some challenges, and we started working early on to confront those. We see that as an important part of the game," commented Dominic Guay, producer of *Watch Dogs*. "That's really core to our aim, and we know a lot more about how to exploit these tablet and mobile aspects now than we did two years ago, so I'm quite happy with the offer we're going to be giving away with *Watch Dogs* and I think it's something we can really build on in the future. I play various games on my phone, but if I'm fully immersed in a game world on my console, if I can stick to that world when I step out of the living room then that's even better. That's the direction we wanted to take here."



Apps are being developed to offer owners of smart devices unique ways to interact with their games.



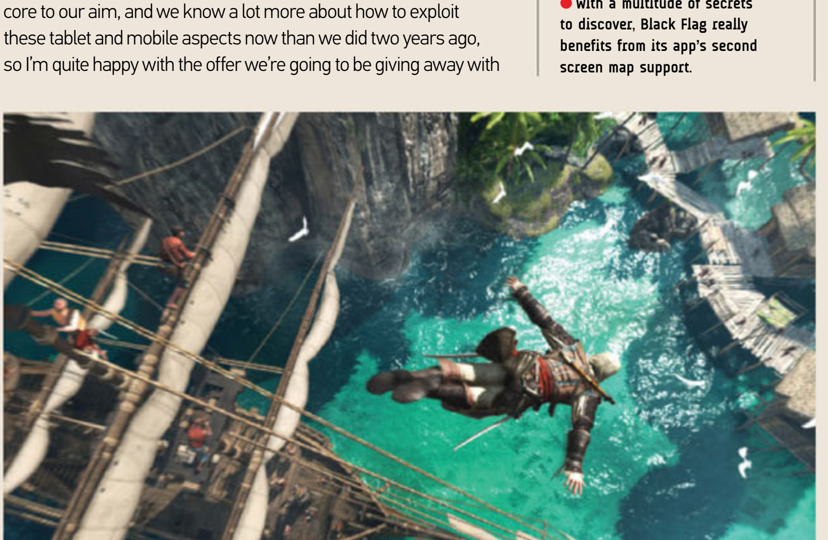
EA and DICE's Battlelog app for Battlefield 4 allows users to check their statistics and adapt their loudouts while on the go.

On the whole, Ubisoft appears to have been galvanised by the new trend, and *Watch Dogs* is a game that has been built around interactivity and the elevated experience available to the user. What is still a valid concern, however, is whether or not this augmented experience is simply a trend with a short life expectancy or an astute and forward-thinking approach to videogame development. The current benefits for the consumer are clearly there to behold – enhanced interactivity, supplemented gameplay, extended game worlds – but how long will these features remain vital?

The contrast between first- and third-party apps comes to the forefront here, as Microsoft and – to a lesser extent – Sony's apps are more general in their appeal and will therefore outlive, say, Ubisoft's *Assassin's Creed IV* app, which is only really relevant until the next instalment of the franchise slices its way onto the marketplace. "Apps are the vogue now, and will probably remain in vogue for a while," offers Michael Pachter, "but 'flash in the pan' is an apt description. I might consider an Xbox or PlayStation app that lets me download DLC, but it is hard to conceive of a reason to download the Ubisoft apps or the Activision apps, since those would have limited utilities."

Ultimately though, SmartGlass and companion apps will last as long as publishers feel they will appeal to the market, or until they stop being financially viable. SmartGlass has certainly taken some impressive steps down the road of added content and gameplay integration, and it will be interesting to see how Microsoft uses this feature during the coming months and beyond – will we be controlling entire games with SmartGlass, much like controlling a PS4 game with a PlayStation Vita? Probably not, it seems. However, it's part of a trend that's on the ascendancy (at least for now) and certainly seems to be the leader of the pack in terms of functionality. Compare SmartGlass to the majority of third-party applications and it really does stand out in terms of user-experience and ambition. Ubisoft has the infrastructure and the ideas to implement something really unique with *Watch Dogs* and *The Division*, but it remains to be seen whether it actually will.

As it stands, it is unclear as to whether this new focus on second screens and cross-platform tech will become a staple of the medium, although developers and publishers would do well to remember that, in any industry, ideas that appear revolutionary initially rarely become standard practice. It stands to reason that SmartGlass and companion app support will only remain prominent until the industry's consumer base tires of it, which could happen sooner than we might think.



With a multitude of secrets to discover, Black Flag really benefits from its app's second screen map support.

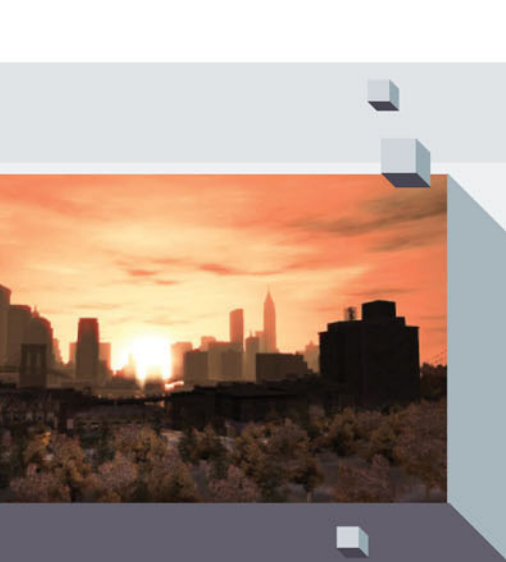


An open world doesn't have to be rendered in greyscale – *The Legend Of Zelda: Wind Waker* takes bright, cartoon graphics and shows you how lovely a stylised world can be.

BUILDING AN OPEN WORLD

IF THE LAST GEN WAS THE AGE OF THE FPS, THEN THIS ONE LOOKS TO BE THE ERA OF THE OPEN WORLD. LIKE THE VOYAGERS OF OLD, WE'RE ON AN EXPEDITION TO CHART THE RICHLY DETAILED VENUES DEVELOPERS ARE MAPPING OUT TO SATIATE OUR DIGITAL WANDERLUST

The PS4 and Xbox One promise to deliver more games like *Rime* – but will the advanced hardware allow more innovation in the genre, or will we see recycled tropes grind the idea to a halt?





An open world isn't just made by developers – thousands of players have had a hand in creating the expansive realms of *Minecraft*; the world itself gives players creativity.



"FOR THE NEXT GAMES, WE WILL HAVE CRAZY BIG WORLDS WITH NO LOADING, FOR SURE"

MUSTAPHA MAHRACH, UBISOFT MONTREAL

Journey shows us how the definition of an 'open world game' is hard to pin down, sitting on the line somewhere between open world experience and sociological experiment.

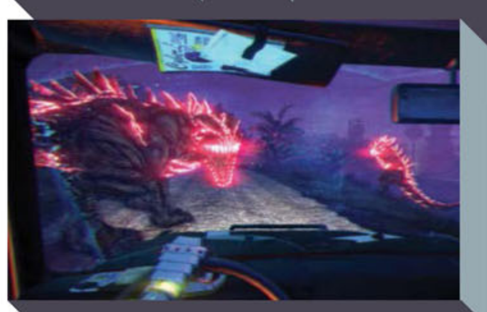
Back in the Eighties, a small but significant spaceship flew through the pixelated star maps of space, marking the advent of the first truly open world game. Gravitating around the awesome expanses of a monochrome cosmos in *Elite*, players had their first taste of gaming freedom. Since then, developers have drawn their scope both closer to Earth and deeper into the depths of space, onto other planets and into other universes entirely.

What is it about an open world that we find so appealing? The vast majority of last year's biggest hitters subscribed to the open world framework – from the American satires of *GTA V* to the opalescent Caribbean waters of *Assassin's Creed IV: Black Flag*, the imposing spires of Gotham to the extraterrestrial frontiers of *Saints Row IV*, gaming has taken a turn for the free-range, the unrestrained, the spontaneous. As our affinity for these worlds grows stronger, our expectations exponentially rise, and the task of creating satisfying environments for us to play in (or destroy, or rebuild, or dominate) falls ever more intensely on the shoulders of the developer.

"We start with a high level concept of our different open world sections – such as island division, types of district, interior locations, type of architecture, building density and so on – and generate a quick mock-up in the game with all that in mind, iterating district by district," Benoit Richer tells us. He's the game director of last year's *Batman: Arkham Origins* and achieved his level design credits in the *Tom Clancy's Rainbow Six Vegas* series and *Far Cry Instincts* – he knows a thing or two about composing intimate, believable worlds. "As we're putting our world together, we need to constantly revise for players' navigations – making sure it's fluid and that they feel navigation is efficient and that they're not being stopped every few minutes. We then work gameplay setup around those main locations."

This design philosophy makes sense, running parallel with the architectural idea of drafting a blueprint before embarking on a construction project – it allows the developer to assemble a skeleton on which to load the meat at a later date, granting an early level of perspective and scope as to how their world will »

> “DICTATING A PLAYER’S BEHAVIOUR IS IMPOSSIBLE, SO WORLD DESIGN IS ABOUT WHAT MOST PLAYERS WILL DO, WHICH ROUTE THEY’LL TAKE – WE CALL THAT THE GOLDEN PATH”
> **BENOIT RICHER, WB GAMES MONTREAL**





» form. “We always prefer the iteration process, rather than the paper design,” agrees Mustapha Mahrach, level design director and mission director on *Assassin’s Creed IV: Black Flag* (he’s also worked on the *Assassin’s* franchise since the second game, having a major hand in developing the shape of the open world genre over this generation). “World creation is one of the first things we start with in conception – we do research on each location to get to know it perfectly, visiting it if possible.” For a franchise like *Assassin’s Creed*, Mahrach tells us, getting the feeling of the time period right is crucial; each location and time zone needs to achieve a distinct individuality and personality – or as Mahrach calls them “gameplay identity” and “gameplay signature”.

A lot of this distinction is fleshed out with ambient life, not just in *Assassin’s Creed*, but in every populated open world. If the first step is composing a skeleton upon which the meat can hang, then the second step is layering on the nervous systems – the twitching pulses that keep the world alive. “The goal of ambient life is to immerse the player in the world and the story, but it also helps guide them to areas of interest. For [*Assassin’s*], we always do historical research on how people live [during] each game’s respective time period, and visiting the real location helps, too. For Constantinople in *Revelations*, for example, we took the guys smoking and carpet sellers from things we saw, right off the street.”

Joe Khoury, a producer at Square Enix Montreal, explained how it’s the sense of atmosphere in the developer’s upcoming *Thief* reboot that infuses the



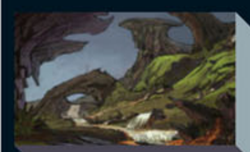
WHEN WORLDS COLLIDE

The beauty of the open world is that the creative team behind them can include pretty much anything they want, hidden away in obscure nooks and crannies. Rumour has it that players were still finding new Easter Eggs in *Arkham City* two years after its release which, in this age of hacking and pulling apart code, is a credit to the imagination of the designer. Our favourite examples of hidden in-game references are; the Lost island in *Just Cause 2*, frozen body *Star Wars* reference in *Skyrim*, Bethesda’s offices in *Fallout 3*, ‘Jill’s sandwiches’ in *Dead Rising*, alongside many, many others.

world with realism and atmosphere, and how that's shaped with architecture, rather than life. "There's a struggle going on in the city – the struggle between rich and poor – and the architecture represents that: you can feel the fear and hatred on every cobble in the city, and that's the kind of intimidation we wanted to design." The practicality of this creative philosophy goes beyond simply designing buildings to lean in over the streets, to choke out the skies and make everything claustrophobic – it crosses the luminal threshold between interior and exterior. "In our open hub areas, we wanted the player to feel that they're in a situation where something isn't *right*; we considered intimidating exteriors and interesting interior design a lot when designing the art direction of the game."

It's a strange contrast to consider worlds of such sprawling complexity and volume being made of such small and passive details – if a game doesn't contain enough varied and motivating environments it feels barren and dull. "We have to consider the density to make sure the player feels there are plenty of things to do when navigating between main locations or points of interest," Benoit Richer explains. "Things like special contextual events, various encounters, environmental storytelling to reinforce the main narrative – it's all these elements that make the city feel *alive*. It's not just a question of seeing stuff, but mainly what players can *do* in these open worlds."

It's safe to say that the most successful open world games hit the right balance between size and detail – games need to achieve a sense of scale that's grand enough to mesmerise and entice a player, yet the world needs to be left vague enough so as not to overwhelm them with objectives – a gamer wants to enjoy a world at their own pace, and not feel pressured into enormous, time-consuming tasks. "In *Black Flag*, pacing the world was one of the most complex tasks, but also the most important one," Mahrach informs us. "We wanted to give the player a challenging experience, but also one that keeps them entertained all along. We needed to ensure there was enough environmental variety; throughout *Black Flag* there are three big cities, there are plantations, uncharted islands, Mayan ruins, jungles, forts, underwater spots, the ocean… we then take each of these environments and make it unique in terms of both visuals *and* gameplay."

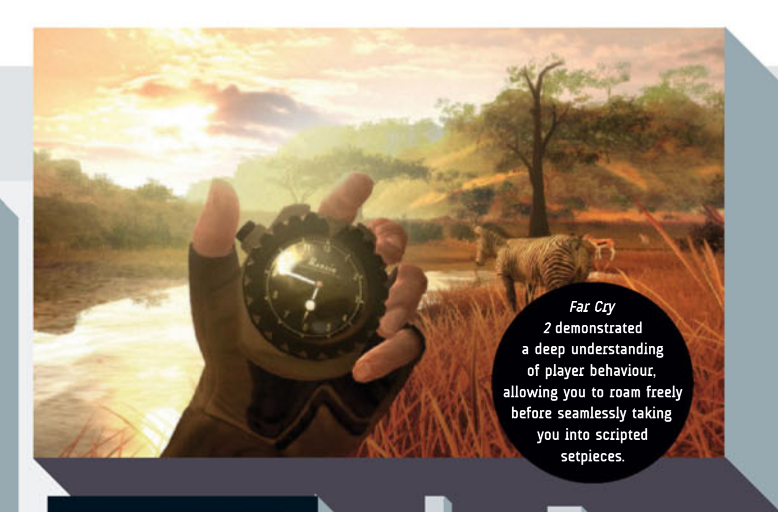


As we've seen the open world genre mature and solidify into a legitimate and unyielding category, we've seen developers perfect the art of measuring narrative beats to deliver emotional payloads at precisely the right moment. Despite a lot of these moments being scripted (*GTA V*'s automatically tuning your radio to the right song at the right time being a highlight of this), a significant amount of cinematic instances are purely incidental. Back in *Red Dead Redemption*, you could ride out onto the wild slopes of borderland America and see the setting sun staining the landscape blood red, a completely non-verbal and unscripted experience you could make a habit of doing daily, if you desired. *Fallout 3*'s most intense world-confirming moments came from finding seemingly minor design choices out in some random house, mid-Wasteland – seeing a woman lying in a blood-covered bathtub with a pistol is distressing enough, worse when you find a child's room complete with bloody crib in the next room.

The beauty of an open world is that writers can abide by that old adage of 'show don't tell'. Many games are weighed down with over-encumbered monologues, relying on heavy exposition dumps to communicate backstory and exposition, tending to rely on cliché for more effective world building. An open world can overcome this by directing a player to certain places at certain times, with the game taking advantage of what the player thinks are their own, anarchic actions.

"Dictating a player's behaviour is impossible, so world design is more about what most players will do, or which route they'll take – what we call The Golden Path," explains Richer. "From one location you'll have a main narrative objective and it's leading you to another specific location in the open world. It's from that location that we trace our Golden Path and it's on this route we place our attractors: incentives, side missions, environmental story beats, crime scenes, voiceovers, Riddler set-ups or crimes-in-progress."

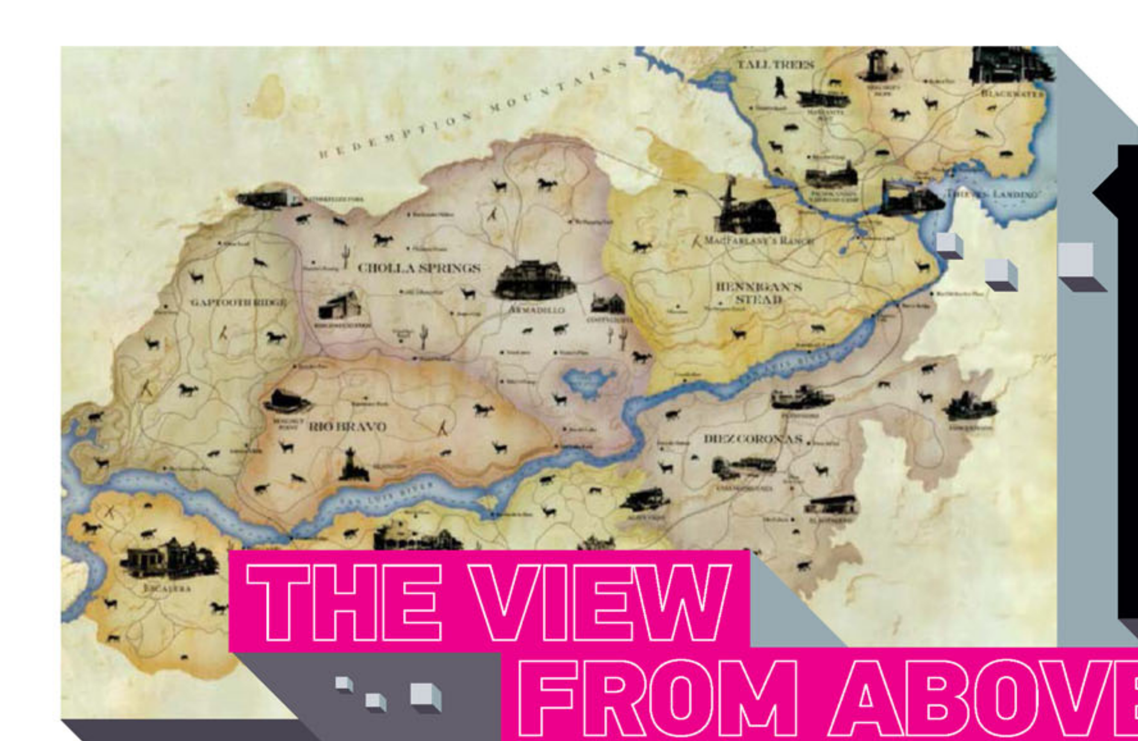
So, despite operating in a world where almost everything is accessible almost all of the time, developers still need to lay down a centralised route that players need to tread to progress. Immersion and investment are hard feelings to achieve, and once a developer succeeds in grabbing the attention of a player, they will do everything they can to hold on. "There are different axes that we use to direct a player's interest," explains Mahrach. "There's the gameplay purpose of the place, the location link to the game's story and the visual aspect." In a series like *Assassin's Creed*, the levels are



Far Cry 2 demonstrated a deep understanding of player behaviour, allowing you to roam freely before seamlessly taking you into scripted setpieces.

PROOF OF CONCEPT

The first stage in crafting any world is the concept art – understanding what artistic direction your environments will take is vital before embarking down the lengthy world-building process. We've always found the prospect of conceptual art intriguing – on paper, any idea can seem plausible. In practice, technology, tools and time must offer up limitations as to what can be achieved, right? "There are some differences between [concept] and finished project, for sure, but there aren't a lot of them," says Mahrach. "I think that's because we've made so many locations now that we know what we want out of the finished game." Richer agrees; "Our high level concept pretty much stays the same – it's in the details that there's a lot of changes as they undergo a lot of different iterations."

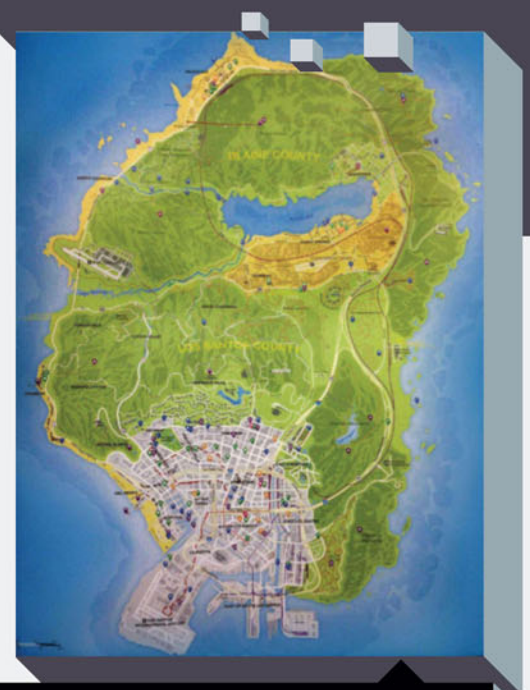


THE VIEW FROM ABOVE

A WORLD WITHOUT A MAP IS A WILD AND UNTAMED LANDSCAPE. PLAYERS NEED MAPS BOTH FOR PRACTICAL FUNCTIONALITY AND AESTHETIC; THERE'S A CERTAIN COMFORT IN A CARTOGRAPHER'S SOLID GEOMETRY

RED DEAD REDEMPTION

Here at **games™**, we're big fans of Cormac McCarthy and long for a day when we can play an interactive interpretation of *The Road* or *All The Pretty Horses*. Until then, our craving for the darkly romantic notions held by outlaws in the American West can be quenched by riding out into the solemn plains of Rockstar's frontier. We've lost hours trotting through woods on horseback, watching the sunlight drain from the sky around us. No-one does an open world like Rockstar.



GRAND THEFT AUTO V

Ever wanted to go to LA but just didn't have the money? Fear not – just throw yourself into *GTA V* and lose yourself in its worryingly accurate representation of the Hollywood Hills and all around it. The game puts a heavy emphasis on flight, and you can see why – it's from the air over Los Santos that you can really admire the scale of the world Rockstar built. Compound that with a gorgeous lighting engine and you've got a world that's occasionally more beautiful than ours.



ASSASSIN'S CREED IV: BLACK FLAG

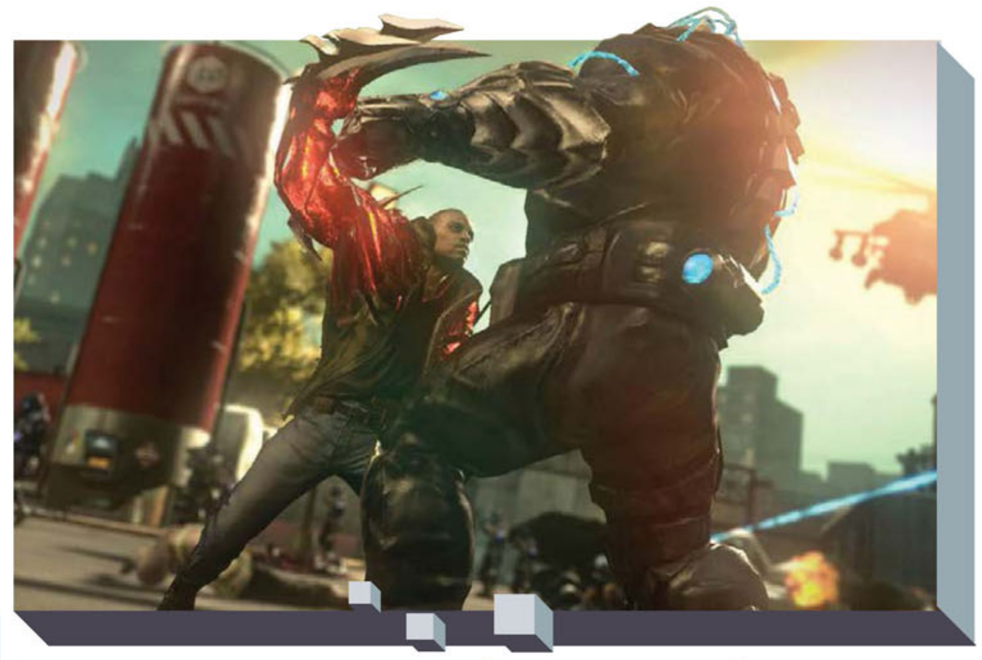
"The world, the missions and the activities of *Black Flag* were designed to make sailing a seamless and major feature," Mahrach tells us. "There's always something to do in the ocean; harpooning, diving, rogue waves to avoid, forts to capture, and different ship formations to fight." The division of certain sections of the map into difficulty was inspired – something we'd like to see more of in open world games.



FALLOUT 3

You'd think a nuclear-blasted Capital Wasteland would be quite restrictive in terms of what environments it can offer, but between some stunning work with the game's mythology and intelligent location placement, *Fallout 3*'s expansive world manages to offer an untouched natural paradise, a city built on a ship, a dank cave full of Lovecraftian horrors, a republic built to honour one man, a variety of claustrophobic Vaults, a museum based on the works of Dante and so, so much more.





SKYRIM

It's perfect for any fantasy enthusiast – play through the initial mission, slay your first dragon and you're off, that's it. Do what you like, go where you want, help people you want to help, kill the people you want to kill. Fancy being a vampire? Cool, go ahead. Want to master the arcane arts? Knock yourself out. Not only is the continent of *Skyrim* ridiculous in its scale, but it also features myriad flora and fauna that infuse the world with a very specific sense of fantasy vibrancy.



SAINTS ROW THE THIRD

The city of Steelport took the slightly absurd pseudo-reality of the *Grand Theft Auto* series and laughed in its face. Steelport redefined the sandbox, and unashamedly so – where *GTA* felt like a detached, sociopathic take on modern society, *Saints Row* took the sandbox genre to its logical conclusion, celebrating madness, rewarding insanity, promoting *Clockwork Orange*-esque levels of needless uber-violence all in the name of good old stupid fun.



built *up* as much as they're built *across*, and this aspect of the world design aids in keeping players involved. "Verticality is as important as horizontal geography because we want the players to stay up high most of the time – it's part of the DNA of *Assassin's*. Being in high spots allows the player to have overview on the location, give him important information, unfog the area and plan their actions according to what they see. This means we always need to make the ascension fun – long climbing sequences are always small puzzles where the player needs to find their next grip to continue climbing."



This raises an interesting point – for games like *Assassin's Creed*, *Fallout 3*, *GTA* or the upcoming *Watch Dogs* that are based on real-world locations, the discrepancy between maintaining realism and altering the environment for gameplay purposes is a tough line to straddle. If a city gets too tied up in imitating its real-world counterpart, it can detract from the fun of playing a game – no-one wants to play through London during rush hour. A developer's focus has to remain on creating fun areas that gamers actively want to sit and sink hours into. "With all the *Assassin's Creed* games we've made, we created what we call TDG (Technical Design Graphic). It's a set of rules artists should follow to make sure our buildings have a good balance between visual accuracy and gameplay. The rules evolve from one game to another, because we make Assassin behaviour evolve to make it more and more realistic and fun."

Creating a city that doesn't actually exist offers up its own challenges, too, but can be markedly advantageous over basing your open world on a landscape that might otherwise be quite limiting. "Being the third game in the *Arkham* series, our major sources of inspiration were definitely *Arkham Asylum* and *Arkham City*," explains Jeremy Price, *Arkham Origins*' art director – the man responsible for giving Gotham its distinct gothic flavour, "yet inspiration also came from a variety of other sources. For Gotham, we researched a lot of architecture from cities like New York, Chicago, Pittsburgh and Detroit, but a surprising amount of reference came from around town here, in Montreal. This city has a real 'retrofitted' feeling to it – an old foundation with a newer construction built on top, which is all very consistent with Gotham. It also snows a lot here!"

The ability to merge fantasy and reality in this way allows game designers to take inspiration from some of the more impressive elements of our real, tangible world and morph them into cyber-representations that don't have to suffer the trade-off in gameplay that comes with photo-reality. *Batman: Arkham Origins*' world maintains the industrial, gothic elements that have come to define the *Batman* universe since the comics took their dark turn in the Nineties. If the *Arkham* series had been developed back then, it's a safe bet that Bruce Wayne's world wouldn't have the immersive quality it does now – the progress the genre has made over the course of the last generation is staggering.

"There are always ideas we can't achieve because of current technology – for example in *Black Flag* we didn't want to have loading screens in the big cities," explains Mahrach, "but the actual tech [we built the game on] didn't allow us to take them out. But for the next games, we will have crazy big worlds with no loading, for sure." Although that's only a technical feature – the ability to traverse entire continents without a loading screen – it shows steady and definite progress towards creating seamless worlds that players can lose themselves in with as little cost to immersion as possible.

The open world genre has found its feet, truly. It's come a long way since a geometric ship began searching the universe in *Elite* – through the first 3D realms of *Grand Theft Auto III*, into the richly detailed seascapes of the Caribbean we've seen at the close of this generation. With Bungie's 'shared-world shooter' *Destiny* set for release in September, we're going to see the console's first legitimate foray into a pervasive, consistent open world that matches players with other intergalactic explorers on the fly. We're on the threshold of a new frontier in exploring this open world, and we're privileged to be in the capable hands of the developers responsible for charting this unknown realm.

games™

THE 50 BEST SET PIECES OF ALL TIME

THE SETPIECE HAS ALWAYS STRIVED TO BRING A LITTLE TOUCH OF THE CINEMATIC TO ENLIVEN GAMES AND, REGARDLESS OF HARDWARE LIMITATIONS, EACH GENERATION HAS SOME JAW-DROPPING SPECTACLE OR IMMERSIVE SCENARIO TO BOAST. STRAP YOURSELF IN AS **GAMES™** PRESENTS THE 50 MOST EXHILARATING SETPIECE MOMENTS IN GAMING HISTORY



1 A TALE OF TWO SCARABS

Game: **Halo 3** System: **Xbox 360** Year: **2007**

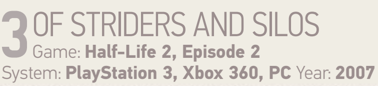
■ Driving into a glacial valley swarming with Covenant forces and heavy UNSC artillery seemed staggered us; the grandiosity of it was stunning. Then, when not one but *two* Scarabs dropped down into the fray, we remember pulling over our Warthog and just marvelling at the sheer scale of the task that lay before us.



2 "A MAN CHOOSES, A SLAVE OBEYS"

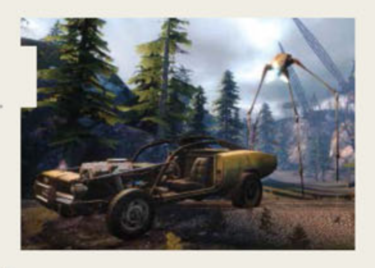
Game: **BioShock** System: **PlayStation 3, Xbox 360, PC** Year: **2007**

■ Walking into Ryan's offices, seeing him calmly play golf and make his speech to you... it's a masterclass in tension-building and interactive narrative. The moment blurs the line expertly between player agency and motivation.

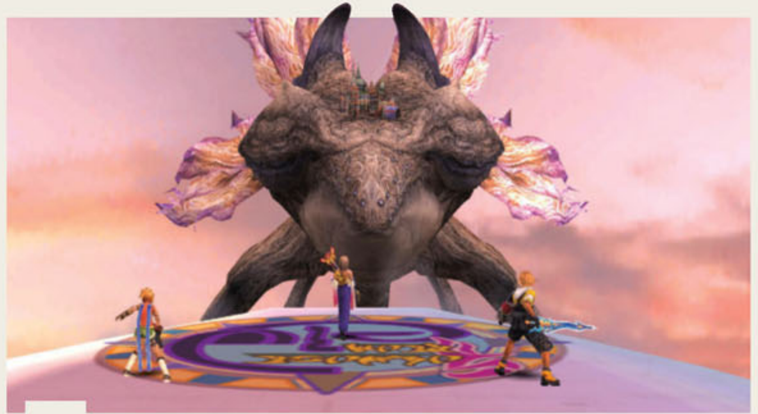


3 OF STRIDERS AND SILOS

Game: **Half-Life 2, Episode 2**
System: **PlayStation 3, Xbox 360, PC** Year: **2007**



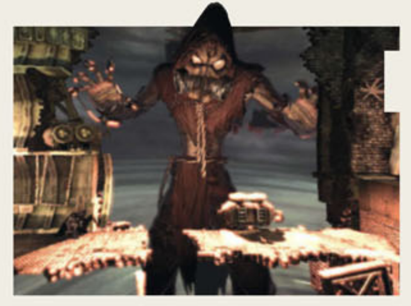
■ Seemingly designed to showcase the gravity physics of the game and the incredible pacing Valve can pull off, the final mission of *Half-Life, Episode 2* felt like a constant uphill struggle – the Striders just kept on coming, and when the dust settled around the dismembered limbs, the relief was palpable.



4 INTO THE MOUTH OF SIN

Game: **Final Fantasy X** System: **PlayStation 2** Year: **2001**

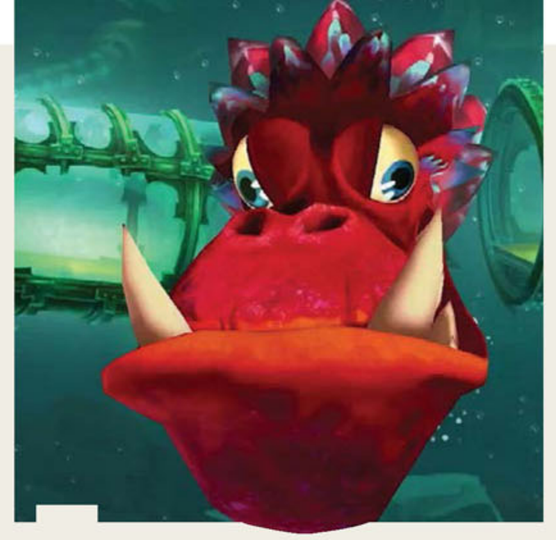
■ The last of a four-part battle against the game's premier big bad, Tidus and co. feel like they're pretty much taking on a suicide mission by driving head-on into the mouth of Sin. Timed with an invisible counter that'll insta-Game Over you upon completion, the whole setpiece is thick with tension and threat.



5 SCARECROW'S NIGHTMARE

Game: **Batman: Arkham Asylum**
System: **PlayStation 3, Xbox 360, PC** Year: **2009**

Taking advantage of the deepest fears of a psychologically damaged orphan shouldn't result in such an entertaining setpiece, but Bruce Wayne's Fear Gas-induced Scarecrow nightmare is our highlight of the entire *Arkham* series. Fusing incredible level design and a unique look into Bats' brain, the whole encounter left us feeling eerily unsettled.



6 THERE'S ALWAYS ANOTHER FISH

Game: **Rayman Legends** System: **Multi** Year: **2012**

The best thing about this whole chase sequence is probably the smug look on the dragon's face the entire time he's attempting to run you down. Showcasing the beautiful animation of the UbiArt Framework engine, this underwater sequence is a testament to the reimagined *Rayman*'s dynamic approach to platforming.



7 HAVIN' A WHALE OF A TIME

Game: **Sonic Adventure** System: **Dreamcast** Year: **2003**

Setpieces in *Sonic* games are done surprisingly well (or at least they were when *Sonic* games were still actually good). The best example is the infamous Orca Chase in *Sonic Adventure*'s Emerald Coast level – the sequence proved it's not impossible to make a half-decent 3D *Sonic* level, if nothing else.



8 "WORST FAMILY FUN VACATION EVER"

Game: **Bulletstorm** System: **PlayStation 3, Xbox 360**
Year: **2011**

After breaking into an abandoned theme park and slaying its crazed squatters, you attract the attention of the park's main attraction; MechaTon – a gigantic cyborg-dinosaur. After a quick game of cat-and-mouse, you come into possession of the machination's control panel, prompting a ridiculous dino-stomping romp of death across *Bulletstorm*'s best level.



9 ESCAPING THE NORMANDY

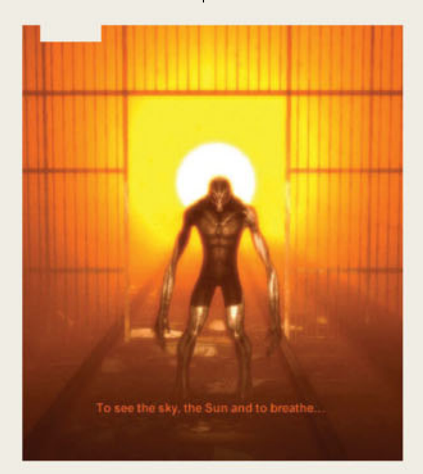
Game: **Mass Effect 2**
System: **Various** Year: **2010**

It takes confidence in your story to wipe the slate clean at the start of the second instalment, and in a symbolic gesture of rebirth, BioWare decided to kill off not just Shepard, but his prized vessel; the Normandy. Starting up a game to find everything you came back to the franchise for being torn apart? An inspired decision.

10 BLOWING UP (PART OF) MOSCOW

Game: **Metro 2033** System: **Various** Year: **2010**

It all goes a bit *Matrix* at the end of *Metro 2033* – when Artyom's reality is hijacked by the mind-controlling powers of the Dark Ones, you have to play through a labyrinth of visions both creepy and enlightening, culminating in a missile launch right into the heart of their supernatural lair.





11 DETONATING MEGATON

Game: **Fallout 3** System: **Various** Year: **2008**

Even if you were having a 'good' playthrough, the temptation to nuke Megaton in *Fallout 3* was palpable – standing on Tenpenny Tower, drinking from a greasy, cracked martini glass with Allistair Tenpenny as you watched the nuclear lightshow illuminate the landscape around you… it was the first taste of the true scale of the Capital Wasteland



12 INSIDE THE RIFTWORM

Game: **Gears Of War 2** System: **Xbox 360** Year: **2008**

In a body-horror homage to the tale of Jonah and the whale, Epic included a fight through the insides of one of *Gears*' most gargantuan enemies; the Riftworm. Between severing arteries, dicing hearts and almost drowning in blood, you'll see Carmine dissolve in stomach acid before erupting from the beast coated in slick crimson. Lovely.



13 CAN'T SQUIRREL YOUR WAY OUT OF THIS

Game: **Super Meat Boy** System: **Various** Year: **2001**

Taking its cues from the traditional, retro platformers but pulling off the tropes with infinitely more style (and blood), *Super Meat Boy*'s first boss fight sees you running from one of Dr. Fetus' lethal contraptions as hundreds of squirrels sacrifice their lives to take down the machination destroying their homeland. Squirrel soldiers, we salute you.



14 DINO MIGHT

Game: **Crash Bandicoot: Warped**
System: **PlayStation** Year: **1998**

Before Naughty Dog started making blockbusters, it had its attentive gaze fixed firmly on *Crash Bandicoot*. Its flair for everything cinematic was present back in the Nineties, though; being run down by an angry Triceratops in the Dino Might level took everything great about the polar bear chases in *Cortex Strikes Back* and added *dinosaurs*. Stunning.



15 OPERATION: UPPERCUT

Game: **Halo: Reach**
System: **Xbox 360** Year: **2010**

Not content with making the planet of Reach your playground, Bungie saw fit to launch Noble Six and Jorge into orbit around the world, too. From an awe-inspiring cutscene that sees the pair blast through the stratosphere into a frenetic dogfight with an armada of Covenant craft, this scene proved Bungie was keen to round off their tenure on the series with a flourish.

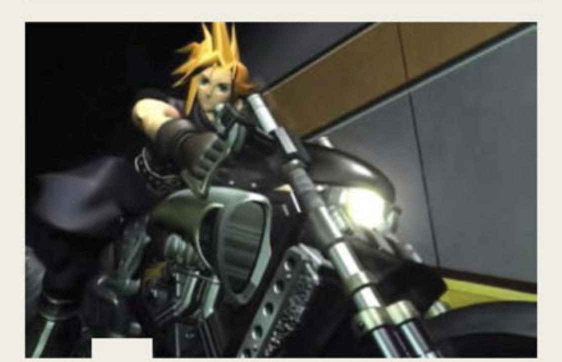


16 THE T-REX

Game: **Tomb Raider**
System: **PlayStation** Year: **1996**

Tucked away deep in a jungle clearing obscured by labyrinthine mountain passages, a Tyrannosaurus rex lay in wait for any adventurers brave (dumb) enough to face it. You could empty hundreds of rounds of pistol ammo into the prehistoric beast before it fell, having to acrobatically fling yourself around the arena in a valiant effort to not get eaten.





17 MOTORCYCLE CHASE THROUGH MIDGAR

Game: **Final Fantasy VII** System: **PlayStation** Year: **1997**

Bombing it down a motorway while wielding an improbably large sword… that's the kind of thing you'd only find in *Final Fantasy*. Guiding Cloud down the pre-rendered freeway (which hit the graphical peaks of the time), and knocking foes off their bikes in the process, was one of the most awesome moments of the PlayStation's entire lifespan.

18 DRAGON!

Game: **The Elder Scrolls V: Skyrim**
System: **PlayStation 3, Xbox 360, PC** Year: **2011**

We've gone broad, here – any time a dragon turns up in *Skyrim*, it's an event to behold. They are living setpieces, attacking you in any context the game has to offer, arriving at unexpected times and creating an adrenaline rush unlike anything else in Bethesda's impressive open world.



19 CHRIS REDFIELD FIGHTS A BOULDER

Game: **Resident Evil 5** System: **PlayStation 3, Xbox 360, PC** Year: **2009**

■ *Resi 5* is a contentious sequel, but one that delights in its absurdity when you're willing to take it less seriously. That tonal daftness pays off in one of the game's final moments, as steroid-infused maniac hero Chris Redfield literally punches a boulder inside a volcano in order to save Sheva Alomar from Albert Wesker. After his stealth bomber crashed there. Huh…

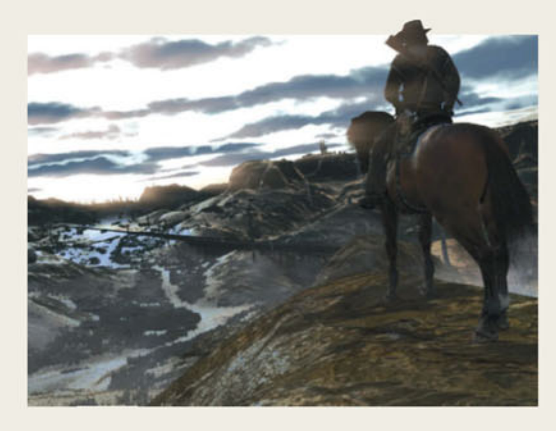


20 HELICOPTER ESCAPE

Game: **Mirror's Edge**
System: **PlayStation 3, Xbox 360, PC**
Year: **2008**

■ *Mirror's Edge* is at its best in the fast moments where you need to plot an escape on the fly to avoid certain death, and being harassed by an armed helicopter while sliding down the glass side of a skyscraper creates the most energising of circumstances. It takes timing and guts – a perfect example of what *Mirror's Edge* excels at.

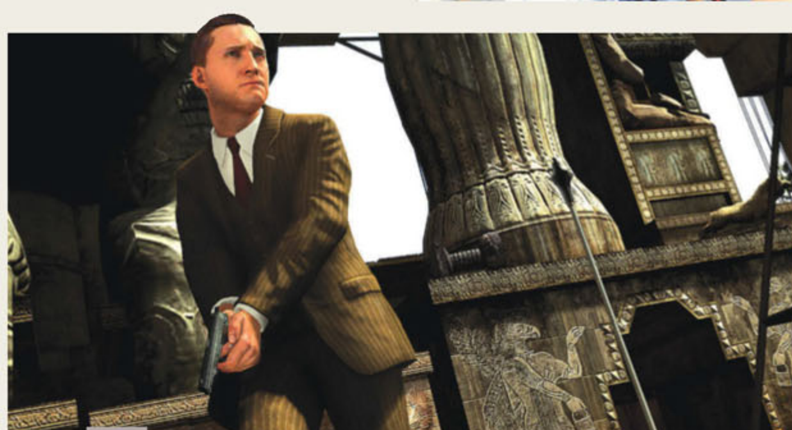




21 ARRIVING IN MEXICO

Game: **Red Dead Redemption** System: **PlayStation 3, Xbox 360** Year: **2010**

■ Let's face it – when you read 'Arriving in Mexico' just now, you heard the opening guitar notes of *Far Away* by José González, so synonymous is that music from *Red Dead Redemption* with this stunning moment in the game, as an entirely new environment is revealed to you. Not every setpiece has to be action-led to produce such a spine-tingling effect.



22 FILM SET CHASE

Game: **LA Noire** System: **PlayStation 3, Xbox 360** Year: **2011**

■ A superb finale to *LA Noire*'s first act sees Cole Phelps chase down a perp in the still-standing set for the 1916 movie *Intolerance* which, like everything else in *LA Noire*, is visually faithful to the time period. It's a unique idea, placing the player in a setting completely at odds with the mythological Forties setting, but in a context that fits the game perfectly.



23 THE TWO TROLLS

Game: **Resident Evil 4** System: **Various** Year: **2004**

■ Let's just say we could've based this entire list on *Resident Evil 4* – the Krauser boss fight, the burning barn boss fight, being chased by a giant Salazar statue and evading the laser corridor all stand out, but this duel with the two trolls allows you to drop one in the inexplicably positioned lava by pulling a switch. It's the most ludicrously enjoyable setting with two of *Resi 4*'s best enemies.

24 THE TRAIN SEQUENCE

Game: **Uncharted 2: Among Thieves**
System: **PlayStation 3** Year: **2009**

■ *Uncharted 2*'s seemingly timezone-straddling train sequence is the culmination of hours of perfectly-timed dramatic beats leading to this one extraordinary assault on a train loaded with enemy soldiers. At one point, a helicopter turns up to blow Drake and a few carriages to kingdom come, an idea we're pretty sure *Skyfall* nicked.



25 INFREQUENT FLYER

Game: **Assassin's Creed II**
System: **PlayStation 3, Xbox 360, PC** Year: **2009**

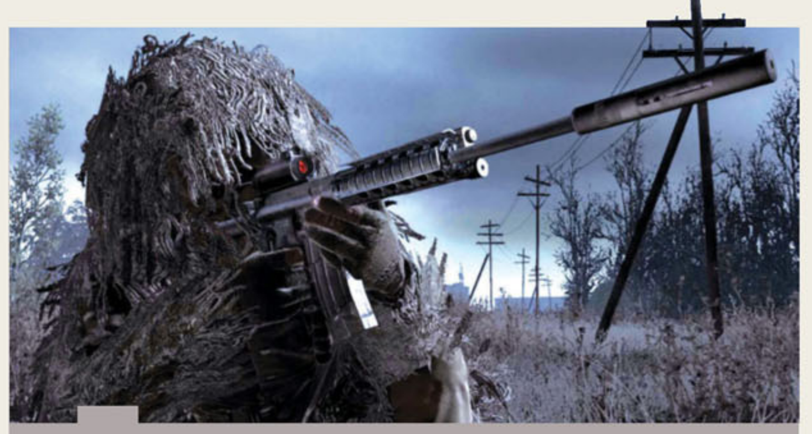
■ As part of *Assassin's Creed II*'s wacky *Bill And Ted*-style silly story, which allows Ezio to be pals with Leonardo Da Vinci, the assassin borrows the inventor's glider to take out an enemy and soars across the city to make it happen. The glider only appears once in the main game – a sensible decision that makes this a neat one-off.



26 CLIMBING AGENCY TOWER

Game: **Crackdown** System: **Xbox 360** Year: **2007**

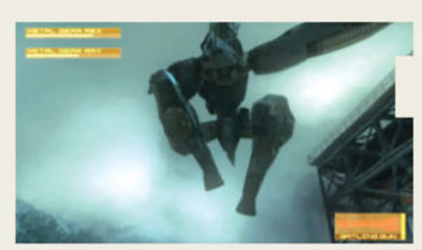
■ We've all done this. Climbing the central tower of Pacific City is a ritual of playing *Crackdown* that makes the most of the game's superb platforming mechanics, encouraging players to find the correct route up there through exploration and experimentation. In no time at all, you and your friends are booting each other off for a laugh.



27 ALL GHILLIED UP

Game: **Call Of Duty 4: Modern Warfare** System: **PlayStation 3, Xbox 360, PC** Year: **2007**

■ A flashback that sheds light on the story, this was the pinnacle of the *Call Of Duty* single-player experience before it became the superfluous dog-fest that is broadly ignored today. All Ghillied Up puts players on edge as the two SAS troops sneak through Pripyat in Ukraine, seeking out Zakhaev for assassination.



29 REX VS RAY

Game: **Metal Gear Solid 4: Guns Of The Patriots** System: **PlayStation 3** Year: **2008**

■ This setpiece shows that less is more, as both Metal Gears from the first two games scrap it out, with only one winner. It's total fan service, of course, set against the backdrop of a HD Shadow Moses, but allows players to finally take the reins of a nuclear robot as they'd always wanted to.

31 BEATING POSEIDON TO DEATH

Game: **God Of War III**
System: **PlayStation 3** Year: **2010**

■ The water effect on Poseidon's horses is so extraordinary in the opening of *God Of War III* that you'd easily believe it was running on PS4. The first boss fight with Poseidon, as titans scale Mount Olympus, is a full-on epic that climaxes with Kratos beating the god of the seas to death via QTE while you watch from first-person.







32 THE HAND THAT ROCKS THE CRADLE

Game: **Thief: Deadly Shadows**
System: **Xbox** Year: **2004**

■ Entering The Cradle for the first time was a very tense experience – as the door slammed shut behind you, you knew you were trapped in this crumbling, deserted asylum. Throw a few scampering madmen in there, darting from room to room under the cover of darkness, and you've got all the ingredients of a future-proof masterpiece.



34 TANK IT TO THE STREETS

Game: **GoldenEye 007**
System: **Nintendo 64** Year: **1997**

■ Playing as Bond makes you feel suave at the best of times, but when you're speeding through a town in a tank, being chased by other tanks, the feeling of super spydom is somewhat amplified. For extra immersion, we recommend playing the score from the film over the top; it makes the whole sequence feel far more Bond.



28 THE MECH BATTLEFIELD

Game: **Zone Of The Enders: The Second Runner**
System: **PlayStation 2** Year: **2003**

■ *Zone Of The Enders*' PS2 sequel mainly specialised in one-versus-many small-scale battles, until this giant setpiece in the final act sees you joining a force of mechs in combating the forces of Anubis. It's a proper battlefield packed with hundreds of enemies that you have to lead and even repair to progress – a map at the side of the screen documents the chaos.



30 DIRGE IN THE DESERT

Game: **Shadow Of The Colossus**
System: **PlayStation 2** Year: **2005**

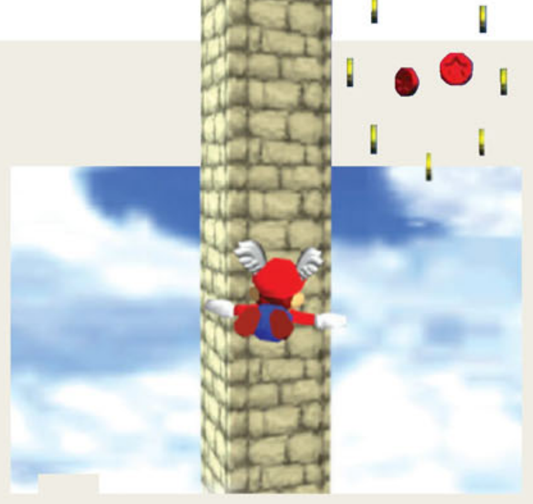
■ The tenth colossus is the one everyone remembers, the giant sand snake occupying an enormous desert space that pushed the PS2 to do things that pretty much no other developer was able to. Conquering it requires you to jump onto its wings, hold on for dear life then delicately manoeuvre across the creature's body to slay it.



33 BIG BLUE RACETRACK

Game: **Super Smash Bros. Melee**
System: **Gamecube** Year: **2001**

■ *Super Smash Bros. Melee* isn't a game particularly remembered for its setpieces, but *F-Zero*'s Big Blue racetrack is probably one of the most enduring levels of the franchise, and it plays out like one long cinematic sequence. Jumping from vehicle-to-vehicle, mid-race, looked stunning on the Gamecube, and still holds up pretty well to this day.



35 REACH FOR THE SKY

Game: **Super Mario 64** System: **Nintendo 64** Year: **1996**

■ Emerging from the clouds above the Mushroom Kingdom, Mario's historically awkward relationship with aviation was soon forgotten the moment he first took to the skies in *Super Mario 64*. With a feathered red cap now in his possession, Mario majestically soared above Peach's castle in one of his most blissfully beguiling moments ever.



36 LET'S BLOW THIS THING AND GO HOME

Game: **Star Wars Rogue Squadron II: Rogue Leader**
System: **Nintendo GameCube** Year: **2001**

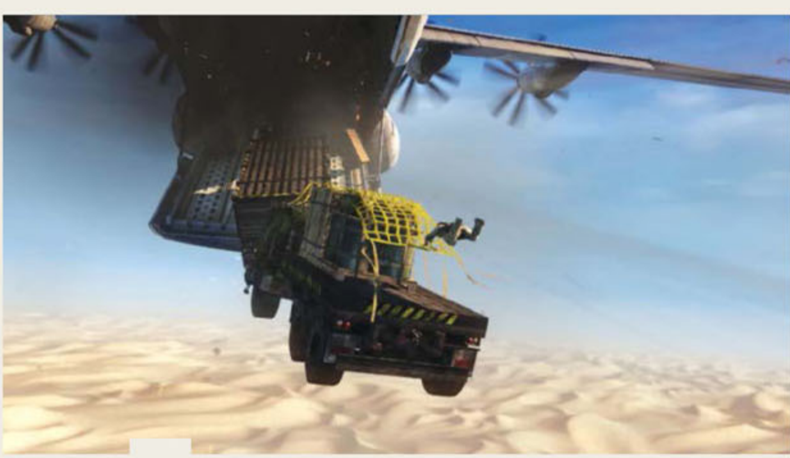
■ One of the original trilogy's most iconic moments has been replicated numerous times, but it wasn't until the *Rogue Squadron* sequel that players got the opportunity to relive the moment. Almost beat-for-beat replicating the entire sequence for *A New Hope* (including audio cues), it's the finest example of *Star Wars* wish-fulfilment the medium has delivered.



37 SHOOT TO THRILL

Game: **Grand Theft Auto V**
System: **PlayStation 3/Xbox 360** Year: **2013**

■ *Grand Theft Auto V* is a game immaculately crafted around a parade of increasingly bombastic setpieces. The Paleto Score particularly stands out among all the submarine heists, train-top motorcycle chases and intense farmhouse shootouts; a nerve-shredding robbery that steadily escalates into a grandstanding gut-punch of bloodied action. It's a true triumph in spectacle.



38 HEAVY BAGGAGE

Game: **Uncharted 3: Drake's Deception** System: **PlayStation 3** Year: **2011**

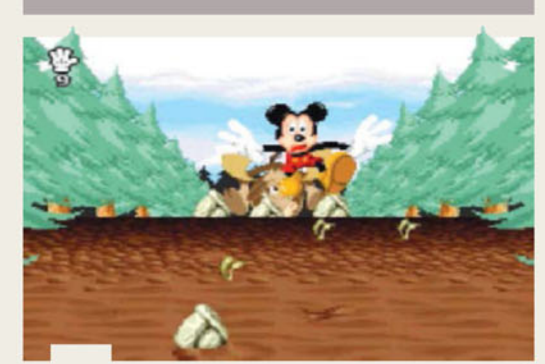
■ Once you've derailed a train the only way is up. Way, way up it seems, as Naughty Dog took to the skies in *Uncharted 3*'s showstopper of an act two finale. While it lifts the same basic concept of the high speed locomotive derailment from its predecessor, the gradual decimation of a plane above the barren desert landscape is *Uncharted* at its pure heart-pumping best.

39 SUPER STAR WARS

Game: **Sonic & Knuckles**
System: **Mega Drive** Year: **1994**

■ Sega did much to pioneer the idea of the cinematic setpiece in the medium and *Sonic & Knuckles* features one of the developer's most spectacular, a breakneck space chase to prevent Robotnik from world domination (or something – the details are fuzzy.)





40 LOOSE MOOSE

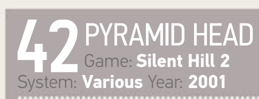
Game: **Mickey Mania** System: **Various** Year: **1994**

■ Pursued by a disgruntled elk, Mickey's towards-the-screen sprint encapsulated the whimsical humour of Disney's cartoon shorts and distinguished *Mickey Mania* from the previous escapades of the eponymous mouse. The game adaptation of *The Lion King* featured a similar sequence the very same year, but the ink-and-paint aesthetic and Mickey's own inimitable charm wins out in this superior of the two sequences.

41 PAIN, PAIN, GO AWAY!

Game: **Heavy Rain** System: **PlayStation 3** Year: **2010**

■ This is a moment dependent on how you played the game in the hours preceding it; those who finished *Heavy Rain* with twitchy detective Jayden rescuing Shaun Miles and battling his captor above a rickety warehouse were privy to one of the game's most intense scenarios.

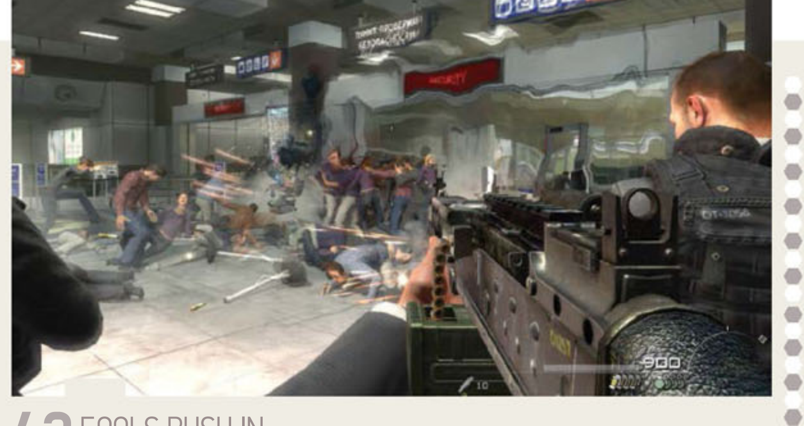


42 PYRAMID HEAD

Game: **Silent Hill 2**
System: **Various** Year: **2001**

■ Armed only with the knowledge that you cannot win, *Silent Hill 2*'s Pyramid Head encounter is one you must simply survive. Literally backed against the wall, fear pervades as *Silent Hill*'s most horrific entity lurches towards your defenceless protagonist.





43 FOOLS RUSH IN

Game: **Call Of Duty: Modern Warfare 2** System: **Various** Year: **2009**

The Most Controversial Moment In Videogame History™, *Modern Warfare 2*'s No Russian mission wasn't all that bad. However, what it did do was rattle players harder than a dysfunctional DualShock 3, delivering a stark message about the gratuitous running-and-gunning that FPS players had grown accustomed to. Breath it in, because *Call Of Duty* will never be this bold again.



45 WOLF AND THE MOON

Game: **Lylat Wars**
System: **Nintendo 64** Year: **1997**

Star Wolf is the gigantic pain in Star Fox's tail throughout *Lylat Wars*, constantly nipping at the heel of Fox's elite crew of pilots. Encountering the rival mercenaries' Bolse Defence Outpost (if you previously failed to defeat them) is one of the series' most memorable action sequences, further increasing the difficulty as you battle to disable the satellite's core.



47 A WHOLE NEW WORLD

Game: **Aladdin** System: **Mega Drive**
Year: **1993**

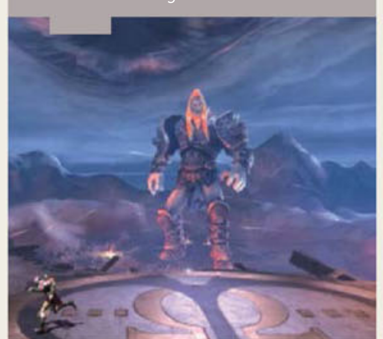
The Nineties really was the era of the great licensed videogame. Virgin Interactive's *Aladdin* adaptation was one of the finest platformers to grace the Mega Drive and its showstopper was the thrilling escape from the Cave of Wonders. Ride the magic carpet and avoid the wave of lava while dodging floating rocks and spluttering flames; the intensity and sheer rush of adrenaline was magic.



48 BIG COP, SMALL TOWN

Game: **God Of War**
System: **PlayStation 2** Year: **2005**

The *God Of War* series is known for its cinematic action, but rarely appreciated for its art. Kratos climbs above Athens to view Ares crushing the city beneath his feet. While it's more of a background setpiece (as Kratos navigates his way around the mountaintop) it's the first opportunity for players to feel the scale of the challenge ahead.





49 ON THE WINGS OF THE KNIGHT

Game: **Batman** System: **Multi**
Year: **1989**

We can't think of any other games that let you fly the Batwing around, let alone ones that let you swoop down onto the streets of Gotham and dodge all manner of peril while scooping up Joker's deadly balloons. This setpiece is a fond reminder of when licensed games were actually worth playing.



44 HOLDING OUT FOR A HERO

Game: **The Last Of Us** System: **PlayStation 3**
Year: **2013**

The epic culmination of an emotional rollercoaster between two of the most charismatic game leads of all time, a battered, weary Joel braves a raging snowstorm to rescue a captive Ellie from the clutches of evil Nolan North. Joel slaughters practically a populace to reach his companion, but the slight hypocrisy can easily be ignored for such a tender reunion.



46 MOTHER PUS BUCKET

Game: **Ghostbusters: The Video Game**
System: **PlayStation 3, Xbox 360** Year: **2009**

While *Ghostbusters: The Video Game* as a whole was deeply flawed, there's no denying that the city-sized bust-up with the Stay Puft Marshmallow Man massages the nostalgia glands in all the right ways. Luigi may have his vacuum and Arthur can keep his Ghouls'n Ghosts, but for a real ghost-busting experience, we'll take toasting one of the cinema's most iconic monsters in the middle of Time Square every time.



50 NAVIGATING THE SEAS

Game: **Assassin's Creed IV: Black Flag**
System: **Multi** Year: **2013**

When you first commandeer the Jackdaw in *Black Flag*, Kenway is being pursued by those pesky British Imperialists. Taking the helm, Kenway and crew slip past hunter vessels and navigate their way through a maelstrom. It's a great introduction to pirating and really shows off the water physics of the game.

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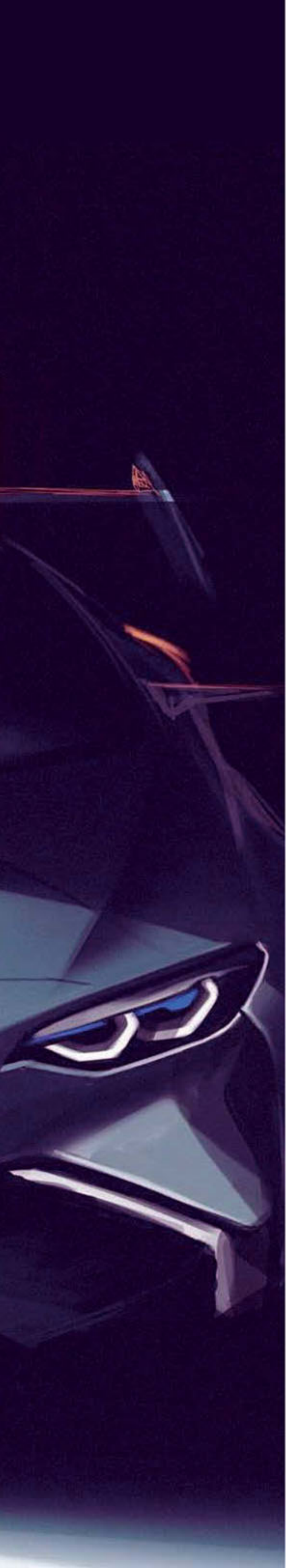
Reviews



96

Gran Turismo 6

Does Forza's main rival have the ability to take pole position?



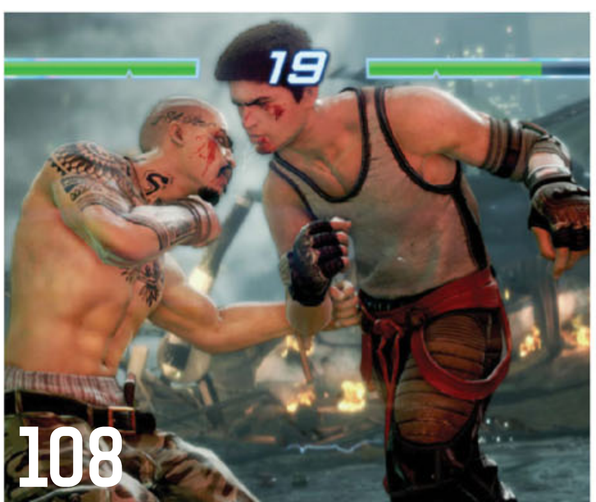
THE AVERAGE

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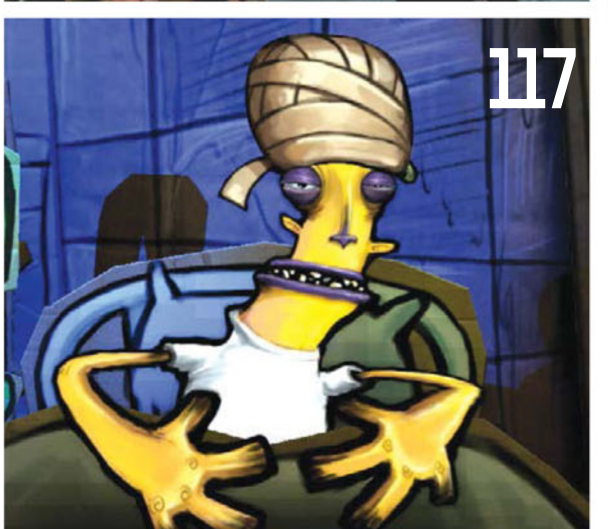












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AN ENTHUSIAST'S DREAM AND VERY MUCH THE GAME THAT SERIES VETERANS HAVE ALWAYS WANTED IT TO BE

SMACK MY BENZ UP

If you are a long-term *Gran Turismo* fan, you might have expected the series' outright lack of realistic damage modelling to be a thing of the past by now, but sadly it isn't. All cars still blandly tonk into each other like plastic toys, and the audio hasn't even progressed since last time: every last collision provokes that same dull thud on the soundtrack. Complicated licensing issues are inevitably to blame, but when compared to the *Forza* series' much-improved damage modelling, it can't help but feel unashamedly retro. *Forza Motorsport 4*'s simplistic metal streaks have given way to a far more varied representation of damage in *Forza 5*, but the jump from *Gran Turismo 5* to *Gran Turismo 6* doesn't seem to have brought about any changes in damage modelling at all.







MEET THE NEW BOSS. SAME AS THE OLD BOSS

Gran Turismo 6

DETAILS

FORMAT: PlayStation 3
ORIGIN: Japan
PUBLISHER: Sony
DEVELOPER: Polyphony Digital
PRICE: £49.99
RELEASE: Out now
PLAYERS: 1-16
ONLINE REVIEWED: Yes

One individual's clever streamlining is another's shameless grab for cash, and the stark differences between Microsoft's newfangled *Forza Motorsport 5* and Sony's defiantly old-school *Gran Turismo 6* can't fail but provoke a bit of a discussion. When all is said and done though, it all boils down to a single question: how obsessive are you, exactly? Purely in terms of content wealth, *GT6* trounces *Forza 5* every single time. *GT6*'s frankly ludicrous selection of 1,200+ vehicles positively dwarfs *Forza 5*'s spread of 200-odd. *Forza*'s relentless sunshine and dry tarmac is trounced by rain, snow, dusk, sand and gravel in *GT6*. There are over 100 tracks in *GT6* and just 14 in *Forza 5*.

But how much is too much? While the latest *Forza* provides just about enough entertainment to keep you going until next year's all-but-inevitable sixth instalment, *Gran Turismo 6* almost has enough content to keep you going until forever. It's a series that has always endeavoured to be definitive, and the ludicrous wealth of content is a testament to that. You can quibble about the superfluous nature of some of the cars (a great many of which are duplicates) but this has always been a series aimed at the hardcore automobile anorak, and the subtle differences between each of those vehicles is what excites so much of that audience. If someone were to buy a PlayStation 3 exclusively to play *Gran Turismo 6*, it's easy to assume that they'd end up getting more than their money's worth from it. And there aren't many games you can say that about.

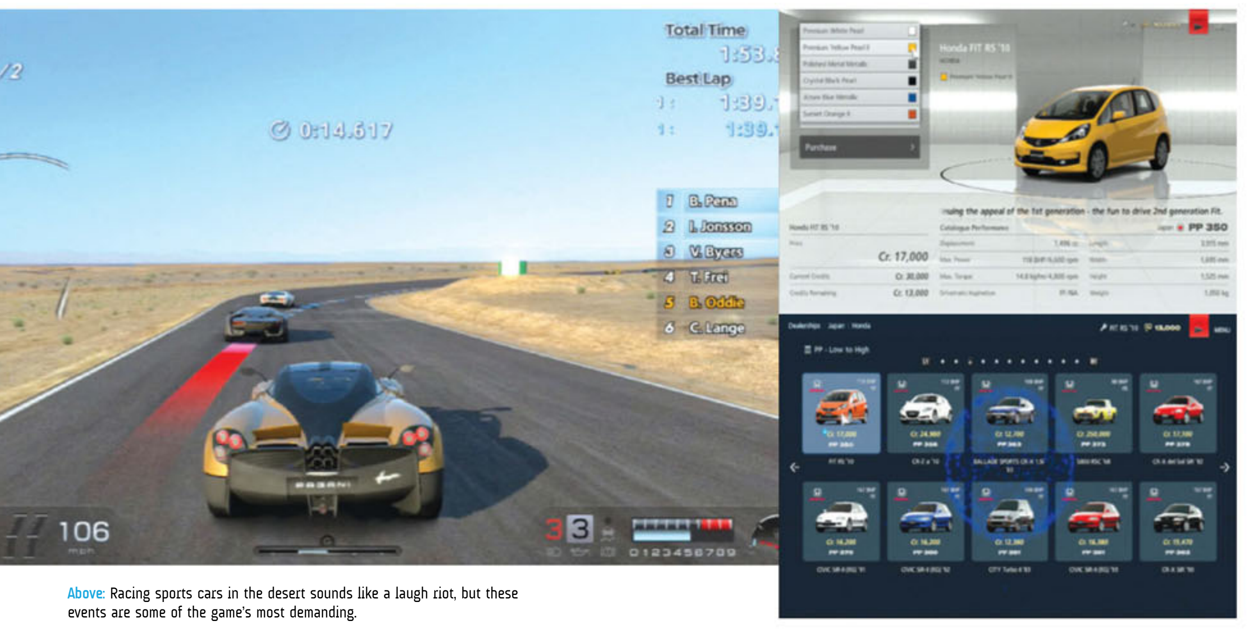
However, *Gran Turismo 6* continues to succeed despite its most glaring omission: personality. Think what you like about the hosts of the BBC behemoth *Top Gear*, but in hijacking that world-beating brand *Forza* has hitched a ride to something that unquestionably belongs in the 21st century. Conversely, were you to show *GT6* to a series newcomer, they wouldn't bat an eyelid if you

MISSING LINK

WHAT WE WOULD CHANGE

TRY AGAIN: Every single post-race menu *still* defaults to having Retry as its primary option. Look forward (as usual) to pressing it by accident more than once. A *GT* tradition.

Left: Designed especially for *GT6*, the magnificent Mercedes Benz Vision Gran Turismo concept is now set to make the jump from the game to the real world. Mercedes is planning to produce just five of them. Get saving.



Above: Racing sports cars in the desert sounds like a laugh riot, but these events are some of the game's most demanding.



Left: The first car that you possess is the surprisingly nippy Honda Fit RS '10, which you get the opportunity to put through its paces at Brands Hatch.

told them that they were looking at a remake of a PSOne game.

Everything, from the workmanlike menus to the monotonous soundtrack to the often laborious loading times, *GT6* just feels like a bit of a relic from the get-go. It almost appears to have been assembled by a computer; businesslike presentation, a nuts-and-bolts levelling system, no unnecessary excitement. But despite its outright lack of aesthetic charisma, *Gran Turismo 6* triumphs thanks to its relentless obsession with the finer details, an ever-peerless handling model, and a very welcome selection of enjoyable side digressions.

The career mode – like the centrepiece of any great driving simulation – has always been all about the grind, and the ever-contentious addition of micro-transactions initially seems like it's going to negatively affect the game's core sense of progression. The truth is that, if you've played a *Gran Turismo* game before, buying a shortcut for yourself will probably seem like a pointless way to cap your own entertainment. Sony's Shuhei Yoshida pointed out on Twitter recently that these transactions are totally optional and are there to provide "an alternative path to busy people." But if that's the case, why should these busy people be asked to pay the full asking price up front? The debate continues to rage on, but one thing is for certain: if you're thinking of picking up *Gran Turismo 6* with a view on potentially bypassing your progress through it, it probably isn't for you.

Speaking of progression, *GT6* still escalates its difficulty brilliantly, and all of the things that the competition doesn't offer – night-time vistas, mountain climbs, desert rally scrambles – are used as devious campaign stumbling blocks. Most of those events are locked away from the novice sections of single-player and it's just as well, because keeping four wheels on course on some of the later rally tracks is ferociously taxing.

Likely to irritate a few fans of its immediate predecessor is the return of mandatory licence tests. This process was completely abandoned in *Gran Turismo 5*, where players were allowed to ignore all available licence tests if they chose to, as player progression was exclusively level-based. Forcing you to jump through (often laughably simplistic) hoops has always seemed like a curious restriction to impose, but its creators obviously don't agree. This wouldn't be quite so irritating if the loading times weren't so drawn-out, but what's acceptable in between 10-15-minute races stops being palatable when you're moving between tests that take less than 30 seconds to complete. You end up spending more time waiting to play them than you do actually racing, which is nobody's idea of a great time.

On the other hand, the highly enjoyable Coffee Break mini-games return, and while they start off very conservatively – with you knocking over a few hundred traffic cones – they soon give way to missions in which you're literally driving around on the surface of the moon. Lending the whole thing a welcome and unexpected air of eccentricity, these lunar

FAQs

Q. IS THIS ON PS4?
Nope. However, series creator Kazunori Yamauchi has said that *GT7* could hit PS4 as early as next year.

Q. CAN I PLAY ONLINE?
Yes, but not immediately. You'll need to earn your A licence in single-player before you can access the online portal.

Q. CAN I REWIND MISTAKES?
No chance. This is still a no-nonsense simulation, even in the so-called Arcade mode.



Right: Although it doesn't render humans particularly well – especially when compared to the stunning crowds seen in *Forza 5* – the gorgeous locations are still designed to make your eyes pop. The UK's Goodwood Hillclimb is a notable highlight.





Above: The Lunar Exploration missions aren't just a goofy lark – they're the result of some pretty painstaking research. You drive the LRV (Lunar Roving Vehicle) in zero gravity along the actual Apollo 15 expedition route. There are no racing lines.



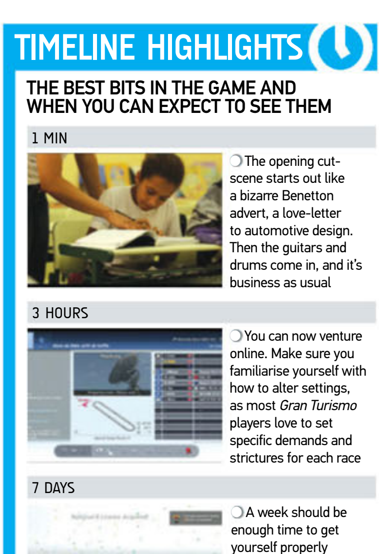
IF YOU'RE ABLE TO KEEP THE FORZA COMPARISONS OUT OF YOUR MIND, GT6 IS A FANTASTIC-LOOKING EXCURSION

Below: Despite the fact that it's a generation behind its main competitor, *Gran Turismo 6* still delights visually, featuring some of the most polished lighting effects and environmental details to ever grace the PlayStation 3.



TIMELINE HIGHLIGHTS

THE BEST BITS IN THE GAME AND WHEN YOU CAN EXPECT TO SEE THEM



1 MIN

The opening cut-scene starts out like a bizarre Benetton advert, a love-letter to automotive design. Then the guitars and drums come in, and it's business as usual

3 HOURS

You can now venture online. Make sure you familiarise yourself with how to alter settings, as most *Gran Turismo* players love to set specific demands and strictures for each race

7 DAYS

A week should be enough time to get yourself properly acquainted with how the go-karts handle. Be prepared for some fierce competition online. A truly hardcore option

STICK 'EM IN THE STOCKYARD

Alleviating a rather big problem with the *Gran Turismo* games of the past, *GT6* now splits your garage area in half, which enables you to keep a close eye on the vehicles that you actually want to keep track of. Managing that absurd roster of over a thousand cars (in addition to the inevitable upcoming downloadable content) could have been a recipe for a massive headache, but if there's a vehicle that you don't like (or are never likely to use) now you can simply throw it in the Stockyard to come back to later, or not at all. It's true that you can ignore the Stockyard feature until later in the game – and instead just use *Gran Turismo 6*'s handy favouriting system for the first few hours – but it's an extremely useful system for moving several vehicles briskly en masse.



morsels are deliberately slow and lethargic, which makes for a pleasant change of pace.

The 16-player online multiplayer component is both functional and highly enjoyable, buoyed by a solid matchmaking system and servers that have proven to be perfectly stable thus far. Multiplayer is going to be a big priority if you've recently come from racing cars on Microsoft's Xbox One, if only because *Gran Turismo*'s habitually stiff and unexciting AI has barely been tinkered with at all. Your offline opponents still basically ignore you for the most part – until you attempt to move beyond third place, that is – and an unassailable lead is never that unassailable: occasionally, race leaders will still inexplicably slow down and wait for you to pass them on the final lap.

So if racing against inane droids all day is making you lethargic, jump into a quick online race to give the game a much-needed shot in the arm. In addition to the online side of things, *Gran Turismo 6* also has a two-player split-screen mode; a lost pleasure which qualifies as an essential inclusion for some fans.

It has to be said that the new menus, monotonous as they are, are a wise step away from *Gran Turismo 5*'s ugly and confusing cluster of panels, and the main hub interface seems to have been directly inspired by the elegant simplicity of the PlayStation 3's cross-media bar.

It's unusual and unfortunate to see a heavy hitter like this arrive on outdated hardware at the beginning of a new console generation, but if you're able to keep the *Forza* comparisons out of your mind for the duration, *Gran Turismo 6* is a fantastic-looking excursion. Running at a silky smooth 1080p and 60 frames per second, it may have had most of its thunder stolen by that new hardware, but the game remains a true sight to behold, a few occasional stray jaggies aside.

MISSING LINK

WHAT WE WOULD CHANGE

TURN IT OFF: A few decent licensed tracks aside, the *Gran Turismo 6* soundtrack is stuck in 1998. Thought you'd heard the last of acid jazz and tinny synthesised guitar samples? Think again.

In the end though, *Gran Turismo 6* is all about tradition. The default controls still map the accelerate and brake prompts to the face buttons like it's 1998, you're not rewarded (at all) for winning races without driving assists enabled, and the AI is all artifice and zero smarts… but this is a robust and ludicrously generous Christmas gift for the genre faithful. It is fundamentally not an innovative package, and hopefully Polyphony Digital will decide to make a few significant steps towards the future next time. But this is an enthusiast's dream and very much the game that series veterans have always wanted it to be. A slightly rusty old banger perhaps, but also the most reliable motor in town.

VERDICT 8/10
CALCULATED, BUSINESSLIKE BRILLIANCE

LET THERE BE LIGHTS…

Resogun

DETAILS

FORMAT: Playstation 4
ORIGIN: Finland
PUBLISHER: Sony Computer Entertainment
DEVELOPER: Housemarque
PRICE: £12.79 (Free to PS+ users)
RELEASE: Out now
PLAYERS: 1
ONLINE REVIEWED: N/A

Remember *Geometry Wars* on the Xbox 360? Remember how it managed to show off the graphical processing power of the console, despite operating on a 2D plane and consisting entirely of fluorescent shapes and lighting effects? *Resogun* does the exact same thing, but for the PS4 – instead of *Geometry Wars*' epileptic linework, *Resogun* is composed entirely of voxels; small cubes that act as 3D, physics-based pixels, gluing together to form the basis of everything in *Resogun*'s urban sci-fi world.

The whole game resounds with a *Defender*-esque vibe – you're tasked with hovering around a circular world, saving humans from constantly spawning enemies that, in true arcade shooter style, come in a variety of shapes and sizes. The main task, as would be expected from this kind of game, is survival, but if you want to boost your score to an acceptable level, then your most pressing goal is saving humans. These little green people are caged at the start of the level, and their restraints can only be broken by destroying enemies that spawn around them. You then must 'catch' these humans and deliver them to a checkpoint before enemy ships kill them – it sounds simple enough, but pulling a rescue off ten times while dealing with incessant waves of enemies is anything but. You're rewarded for your efforts aptly, however; between decent weapon upgrades, boost bonuses, multipliers and extra lives, it's *always* in your interest to save as many little green people as possible.

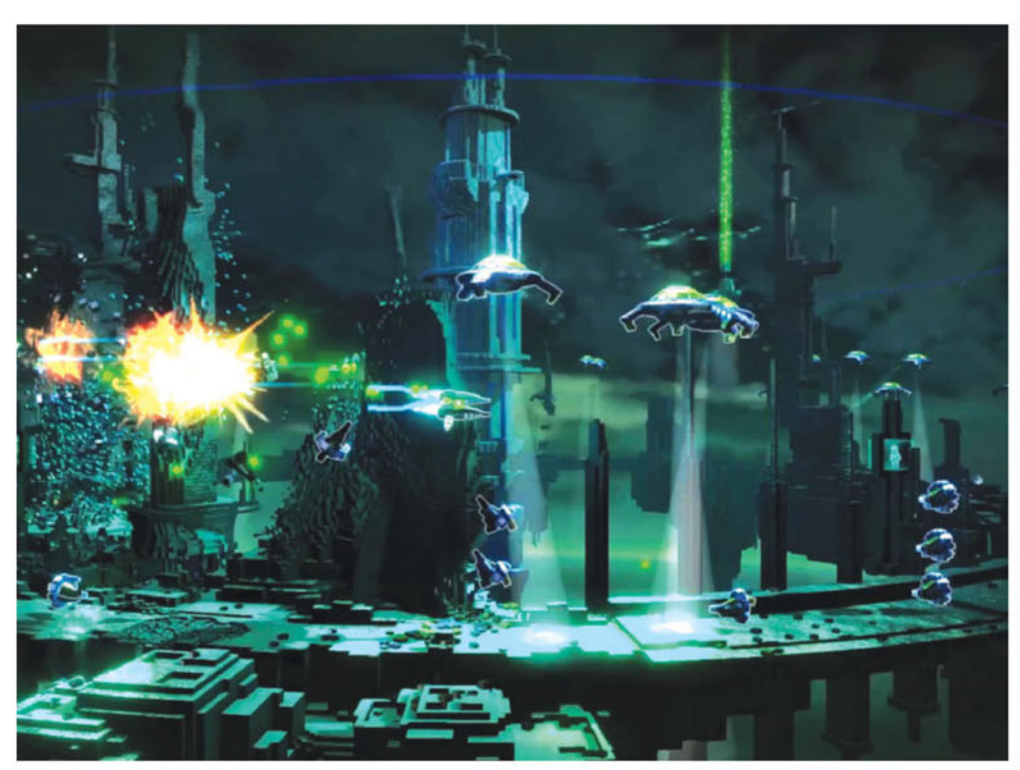
The learning curve is forgivingly incremental – each stage (broken into three phases) introduces a new lethal element to overcome, and rounds it all off with a boss. After the first few stages, the game ramps up the intensity and shifts from a casual arcade-inspired twin-stick shooter to legitimate bullet hell. While it isn't as intense as some other games in the genre (this is no *Ikaruga*), it'll certainly have you balanced on the edge of your seat, crippling your thumbs in an athletic attempt to just *not die*.

The joy of *Resogun* comes from that deep-set urge to survive and get your score multiplier up. Similarly to *Geometry Wars*, multipliers are increased by collecting small

Right: The screen-swallowing bosses of *Resogun* each offer their own unique challenges. Some spray bullets at you that you've got to weave in and out of, some come at you at an incredible pace, and others you have to get inside and destroy from inside their own bowels.



Above: These screens looks overwhelming at first glance, but once you get used to the various light bursts and effects, the game becomes surprisingly simple.



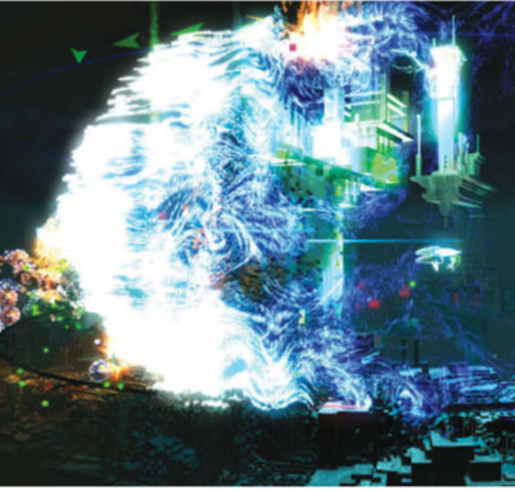


Above: There are a variety of enemies in the game, and each have their own behaviour patterns you'll have to learn if you want to come out on top.



FOLLOW THE LEADERBOARD

In a game like this, it's no surprise that the most compulsive element comes from outside the core gameplay. Shipping with a fully integrated leaderboard, most of *Resogun*'s longevity comes from your innate desire to crush your friends' scores. You see that someone's gotten the better of you on Stage One's Veteran setting? Well, that's the rest of your evening written off, then. It puts us in mind (once again) of *Geometry Wars* – or even *Trials*. Considering a lot of the skill in *Resogun* comes down to twitch reflexes, you always *know* it's possible to best a milestone score… it's just a matter of whether you're ever patient enough to do it.



THE TRANCE BEATS AND RESPONSIVE SONIC BACKING OF RESOGUN COMPOUND THE SLICK VISUAL PRESENCE

green voxels and the grace period between collecting a voxel and the multiplier resetting is fairly unforgiving. It forces you to hunt down enemies just to collect their precious, sustaining green chunks, all the while swooping in and out of their lines of fire. Getting your multiplier up to 17x feels like a genuine achievement – survive an entire level, get your score up, and you're confronted with a monolithic boss that consumes half the screen. Each boss requires a specific strategy to overcome, and some dexterous fingerwork, too. It breaks up the straight, predictable pattern of the levels effectively, throwing in an extra challenge once you get used to reading the attack patterns of the enemy vessels.

Once a boss is cleared, you get a purely aesthetic but eye-bleeding reward; everything in the level erupts in a shower of individual voxels. These aren't passive particle effects, either – these are all individual items powered by their own reactive physics. Seeing this always gave us pause – it's a true showcase of the PS4's processing power. The rest of the game isn't, honestly, *that* next-gen, but these occasional flourishes of physics-powered glory make up for that.

FAQs

Q. DOES IT LOOK NEXT-GEN?
For the most part, yes. Especially when everything explodes and showers you in lovely next-gen voxels.

Q. IS THERE MULTIPLAYER?
Unfortunately not, but then that would affect how the game works. It's a perfect pass-the-pad game, though.

Q. HOW ARE THE TROPHIES?
Trophies are challenging but not impossible – we've seen quite a few people get platinums for title already.

BETTER THAN: DEFENDER

WORSE THAN: GEOMETRY WARS: RETRO EVOLVED 2

A little extra depth is given to the simplistic progression of the game by way of Overdrives and bombs. In the first few levels, a bomb is a nice way of sweeping the screen clear of enemies (resplendent in its voxel-shattering wonder), and becomes your lifeline in later levels when you're surrounded. Overdrives are a nifty way of cutting down swathes of enemies to race to threatened humans; combining your special laser with a boost can quickly clear the majority of the screen, allowing your rescue attempts of the helpless bipeds more chance of success.

SYNTHESIS

BRINGING GENRES TOGETHER

FLINGER PAINTER: *Resogun*'s man-flinging mechanics offer a weird addition to the game – once a human is picked up, you can fling them to safety. We haven't seen that before.

Housemarque has a healthy heritage with *Super Stardust HD* – a game whose soundtrack arguably garnered more interest than the actual game. *Resogun* is clearly keen to live up to that high standard – both the soundtrack and the sound design of the game are superb. We find ourselves reluctantly reminded of *Geometry Wars* again, the trance beats and responsive sonic backing of *Resogun* compound the slick visual presence of the title, working together to deliver an experience that is as hypnotic as it is engaging.

Our criticisms lie in the simplicity that's found once you look behind the well-presented veneer of the game – it's all rather simple, there isn't an awful lot of strategy involved and the game seems to rely on adrenaline more than wits. Combine that with the limited levels and ships, and you've got a game that appeals to the hardcore score-attackers, but may leave those in search of something a little extra out in the cold.

For a launch title, this is a solid, unrelenting piece of shooter gold that adds some fresh ideas to the bullet hell genre. It also dials back the difficulty and makes the busy screens of a dual stick shooter accessible to a wider audience. Housemarque has once again delivered on all fronts, creating a compulsive and refined game that showcases the meaty power of the PS4 – and that really isn't bad for a launch title.

VERDICT 8/10

A TRADITIONAL SHOOTER WITH FRESH IDEAS

MORE OF A FINAL FANTASY GAME THAN ANY RECENT FINAL FANTASY

Bravely Default: Flying Fairy

Right: The town maps and hubworlds are designed with such an art-style in mind that they really take advantage of the graphics engine behind the game. Every town has a personality that oozes through in every brick – it's a pleasure exploring new locales.

DETAILS

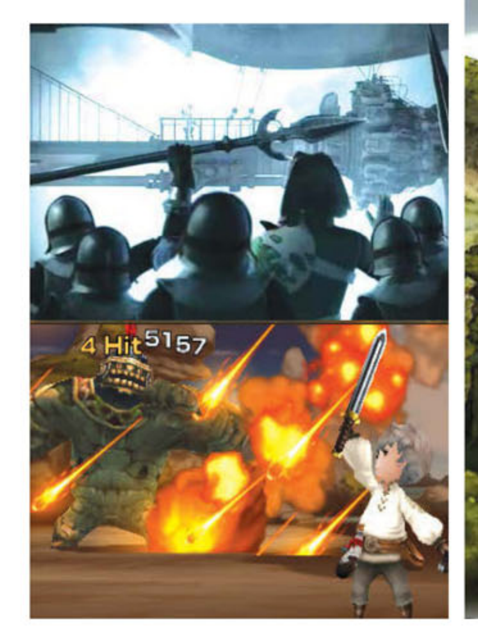
FORMAT: 3DS
ORIGIN: Japan
PUBLISHER: Square Enix
DEVELOPER: Silicon Studio
PRICE: £39.99
RELEASE: Out now
PLAYERS: 1
ONLINE REVIEWED: N/A

It's no coincidence that the oddly titled *Bravely Default* comes with a suffix that has the initials 'FF' – this is a *Final Fantasy* game in everything but name. *Bravely Default* ticks all the right boxes for long-term *Final Fantasy* fans; this has the tone of *Final Fantasy IX*, the mechanics of *The 4 Heroes Of Light* and the complete feeling of a cohesive world you'd find in Ivalice or Spira.

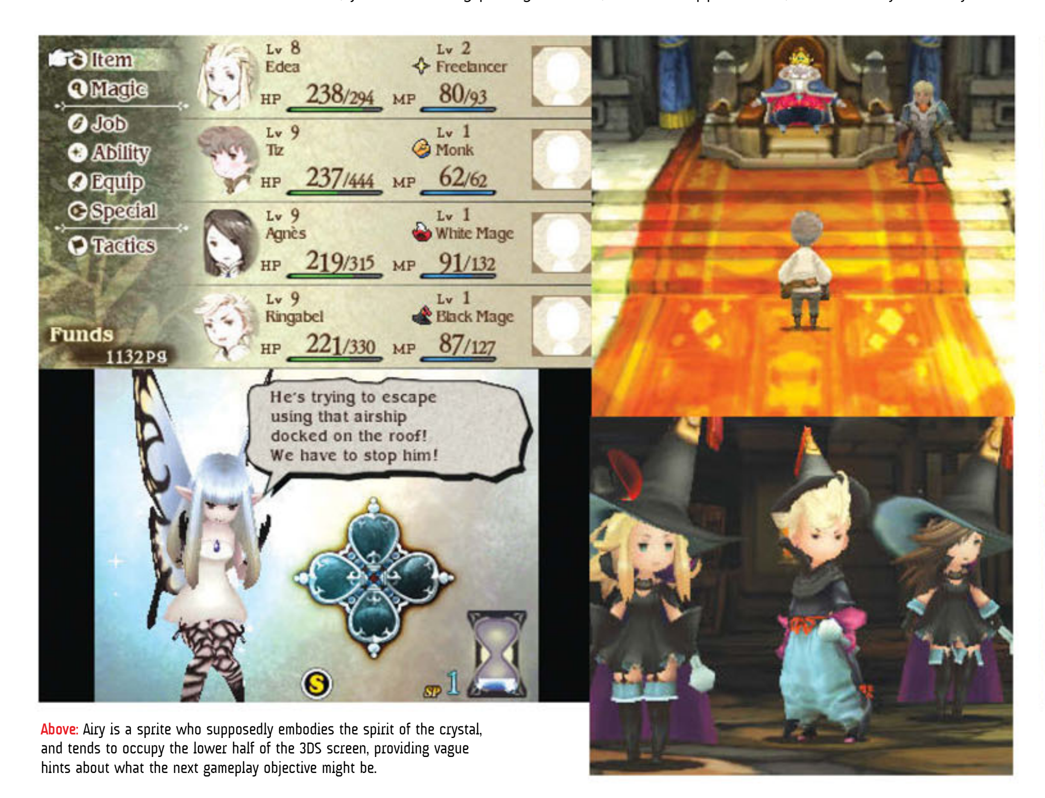
You can clearly tell this game is a spiritual successor to the DS' *The 4 Heroes Of Light*, released back in 2010. Neither games fit securely into the main *Final Fantasy* series, yet *Bravely Default* is a resounding example that the franchises' tropes can work better outside of in-house development; Silicon Studio has taken everything that personifies the flagship JRPG series and invigorated it with a fresh perspective.

RPGs like this always revolve around their central cast, and *Bravely Default* does an exemplary job of finding four personalities that clash with each other by taking advantage of typical RPG stereotypes – you've got the level-headed, justice-hunting protagonist Tiz, the frenetic amnesiac and part-time lothario Ringabell, the defiant soldier Edea and the refined, enigmatic Agnes. Where some story-driven games lose themselves in a quagmire of cast-members, the intimate team of *Bravely Default* serves as a great crew of agents in which to explore this new world – a world reminiscent of *Final Fantasy IX*'s civil war-torn realm and power games. You and your crew feel like pawns being played out on a chessboard of political intrigue and deception, and – like a dialled-down *Game Of Thrones* – you'll soon start looking behind the curtain, revealing the people that are really pulling the strings.

Level- and skill-progression is carried out through a job system, which – oddly enough – feels like it owes its origins and make-up to *Final Fantasy Tactics*. Old favourite classes are present; Black and White Mages are playable, alongside Dark Knights, Monks, Thieves and Summoners. This wouldn't be a *Final Fantasy* homage without Summons, and although Ifrit, Shiva et al don't make an appearance, one of your mystical



Below: Like all the best games, *Bravely Default* has a playable Pirate class. Character models aren't the most detailed things in the world, but the design effort is exemplary.



Above: Airy is a sprite who supposedly embodies the spirit of the crystal, and tends to occupy the lower half of the 3DS screen, providing vague hints about what the next gameplay objective might be.



Above: The world map itself gives the game a great sense of scale – something that honestly can't really be said of a lot of handheld RPGs.

A CLASS OF THEIR OWN

The character models in *Bravely Default* feel slightly aged – the only thing that really differentiates the main characters are the (admittedly amazing) voice actors; their in-game representations look like androgynous mannequins. It's the enemies, then, that stand out the most; you collect classes by harvesting Asterisks from enemy commanders, and each commander holds a different, well-designed class for you to pilfer. A lot of the classes are part of optional side-quests (indicated on the map with a blue marker) and you can end up missing out on vital abilities or access to moves if you're not observant. We'd recommend picking up as many of the Asterisks as possible – it makes the later parts of the game a lot easier, and old fan-favourite jobs are reimagined in a loyal and attentive way.

SILICON STUDIO HAS TAKEN EVERYTHING THAT PERSONIFIES THE FLAGSHIP JRPG SERIES AND INVIGORATED IT WITH A FRESH PERSPECTIVE

allies does bear a passing resemblance to *FFVIII*'s Doomtrain. Depth of gameplay comes from merging class-specific skills with complementary classes – similarly to Tactics, ninjas unlock the ability to dual-wield; combine that with a Holy or Dark Knight and you'll be unstoppable. Understanding how your characters work and the distinctions of the available jobs makes this an RPG with a bit more depth than recent console-based affairs have offered us.

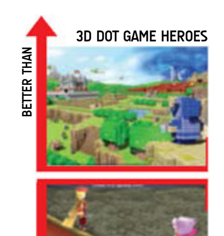
Another mechanic introduced for this game is the ability to Brave or Default on your attacks. While worded slightly interestingly, this basically means you can stack attack points – you can move between -4 and +3 attacks; the resting value is 0, and you can 'borrow' four attacks to unleash a barrage, then wait four turns until your value's replenished (this is Brave-ing). You can also choose to Default; not attack for a turn and save up for a flurry, while not impacting any future turns. It's a fairly convoluted system, and you can choose to ignore it with little consequence. A few early battles teach you the importance of saving up moves to kill a bulky enemy outright, then having enough turns free to heal yourself in the aftermath. It takes some getting used to, but it can be very rewarding when you get the hang of

FAQs

Q. DOES THE GAME REVOLVE AROUND CRYSTALS?
Of course it does – the invading Eternian forces are after the four elemental crystals. Now where have we heard that before?

Q. ARE THERE LIMIT BREAKS?
Yes; weapon-specific mega moves are present in the game, typically activated by Defaulting enough times to charge them up.

Q. DO THE CHARACTERS HAVE RIDICULOUS HAIR?
While the graphics engine powering the game may not be powerful enough to render them beautifully, characters do indeed have gravity-defying dos.



it (our random encounters just became us hitting Brave four times for every character and wiping out the enemies before they had chance to react to us, making grinding a forgiving, not-that-dull experience).

Bravely Default makes use of the 3DS' hardware capabilities, too, but it all feels a little tacked on; we appreciate the effort to validate StreetPass functionality in the game, and the capability to summon 3DS friends' avatars is a unique addition, but the game takes great pains to explain a feature that feels defunct pretty quickly. There is a mini-game where you where you can rebuild your hometown of Nolende, which can provide you with items unobtainable elsewhere in the game. This gives you an incentive to hunt down other *Bravely Default* players, but it seems if you don't use StreetPass much then parts of the game will be locked-out for you.

Bravely Default takes care to observe the oeuvres of modern console-based RPGs, too, including elements of game design that have held other handheld titles back in the past. Menus and interfaces are clean and easily navigable, the battle speed is customisable and you can skip cutscenes. The game's slightly held back by its insistence on dungeon-crawling; all encounters and enemies are contained to dungeons you'll find yourself revisiting a few times, and overworld enemies never seem to become too threatening.

FINGERPRINT
WHAT MAKES THIS GAME UNIQUE

TIME TEAM: *Bravely Default* rewards you for putting the game on standby mode; for every eight hours of sleep, you gain extra moves in battle. These can be bought for real money, too… hmm.

The localisation of the game has taken almost two years, but it's worth it; the voice acting is watertight, the translation of the story is done with respect and the whole game resounds with a traditionalist JRPG vibe. *Bravely Default* does a lot to invigorate the genre and remind you what was so successful about old-school *Final Fantasy* games; a succinct love letter to the series' roots. If this is what Square Enix can do when it outsources the *Final Fantasy* property (even spiritually) we hope to see the core series go down this route, too; it's a damn sight better than the numbered entries' recent efforts.

VERDICT 7/10
A MUTED HOMAGE TO FINAL FANTASY'S EXTENSIVE LEGACY

NINJAS IN CORRIDORS IN SPACE

Warframe

DETAILS

FORMAT: PlayStation 4
OTHER FORMATS: PC
ORIGIN: Canada
PUBLISHER: Digital Extremes
DEVELOPER: In-house
PRICE: Free
RELEASE: Out now
PLAYERS: 1-4
ONLINE REVIEWED: Yes

BETTER THAN
SCOURGE OUTBREAK

WORSE THAN
BORDERLANDS 2

The dawn of the new console generation has pushed new trends in gaming to the fore. Xbox One's launch games have been coloured not only by mild underperformance but also a proliferation of unpleasant microtransactions. PS4, less egregiously, appears to be the new home of free to play, with Digital Extremes' *Warframe* the current poster boy.

Not that it's a particularly handsome model. *Warframe* is an amazingly dull-looking four-player co-op romp where space ninjas, suited up in the titular Warframes, leap into the interiors of spaceships to kill anything aboard and steal the loot. What this actually amounts to is a lot of corridors, a lot of shooting, and a little bit of sword-slashing. It's perfectly acceptable – sprint into a dark corridor with some buddies, shoot everything, collect what they drop. Expect nothing more, and *Warframe* is absolutely fine.

In fact, its only real and genuine negative is the melee combat, which sees you slashing aimlessly at enemies without the help of any sort of lock-on. It's pointless, really – it's more than possible to play the game without it. Strangely, too, you can sprint along walls and slide across the floor *Vanquish*-style, but the game is so pedestrian there's never any reason to do either.

Being free-to-play, there are plenty of things to spend real money on, both cosmetic and game-specific. Despite offering one package that costs an eye-watering £109, though, Digital Extremes should be commended for making *Warframe* completely accessible and playable for those not willing to spend anything – it genuinely does feel free to play, rather than pay to win.

Backing up all the corridor-based trudgery is a completely baffling set of menus, upgrade systems, crafting and even a level select that's about as simple as long division. Hilariously, there's an amazingly patronising tutorial that tells you how to move and look around, but almost nothing that explains the game's utterly confusing menus, the in-game hacking or even how to wall-run.

Even though it's a fundamentally boring game, it's tough to hate *Warframe* in any meaningful way. It's an amiable fellow, providing the bare minimum of action and not charging you for the privilege. If the in-game transactions were more intrusive, or if the game cost money to being with, then the fact it drops more frames than a nervous Specsavers employee or takes minutes to load its unimpressive interiors would be serious issues. As it is, though, it just all feels harmless. Aimless, too, but harmless.

Warframe won't be the game to convince you that free to play is the future, but it's also not going to send you ranting on message boards and bemoaning the death of videogames. It's free, it's fine, and it's instantly forgettable.

MISSING LINK

WHAT WE WOULD CHANGE

Z-TARGET: Adding a lock-on to the melee combat would improve it immeasurably. It's been included in the PC version, so expect it soon.



Above: *Warframe* has been out on PC since March and has gained a decent-sized audience, proving there is an market for middle-of-the-road shooters that cost no money. The keyboard and mouse controls suit the melee combat as spinning around quickly helps improve your accuracy.





Above: The combat is actually reminiscent of *Mass Effect*'s, with powers being introduced once you've gathered enough credits to afford them. The third-person shooting is similarly perfunctory, too.





Left: The DualShock 4 sticks have no deadzone, meaning accuracy is at an all-time high, and the sharp, responsive triggers make split-second shooting is easy.

FREE TO PLAY OR PAY TO WIN?

Blacklight: Retribution

There's nothing essentially wrong with the free-to-play concept. In fact, done well, it's a treat – a videogame that costs nothing. It's when games lull you in with the promise of freedom then surreptitiously toy with your expectations until you're left with the binary choice of pay or give up, well that's when they have problems. And when that design model creeps its way into full-priced games, then the whole affair gets a bad name. *Blacklight: Retribution* falls very much on the 'good' side of free-to-play. Yes, there are weapons and items in the game's store that'll set stupid people back a small fortune, but no one is forcing your hand. In fact, there's barely any coercion at all – this is a game that's more than playable for no cost whatsoever.

And that's because it's a fundamentally sound online shooter; one that offers a solid approximation of *Call Of Duty* with a few neat twists of its own. Ostensibly, it's a futuristic game, although the weapons are still largely assault rifles and SMGs. Instead of a radar, though, players can activate an *Arkham*-style X-ray vision that limits their movement and combat ability in a trade-off for immediate visibility of everyone on the map.

This is a stroke of genius, as it completely eliminates camping, meaning Retribution can focus on strong run-and-gun firefights without anyone hiding in a corner crouching in a sea of claymores. And experienced FPS players will appreciate a few of its other small innovations. All of the information you need is centred around your crosshairs, so you can keep tabs on your ammo, sprint duration and health without ever having to glance away.

Blacklight: Retribution layers on a few fleshed out ideas of its own, too. Despite the game modes all appearing elsewhere (TDM, Kill Confirmed, Domination), Zombie Studios awards every positive action in the game with CP, a per-match currency that can be traded in at the 'depot' (spawn point) for power ups. These range from piddly things like health packs all the way up to a mini *Titanfall*-esque mech. Still, the emphasis remains on the gunplay. Every weapon has vast amounts of customisation options, and to even unlock something as paltry as a scope will take an almighty grind. Or, a bit of real-world cash.

It's hard to begrudge the game asking for a bit of money, though, because it is absolutely playable with the most basic loadout. Your original assault rifle has almost no kickback, takes down enemies in a couple of shots and has excellent range. Taking down high-level foes feels eminently possible almost as soon as you begin.

Those invested in *Battlefield*, *Killzone* or *Ghosts* won't find much to wrench them away, but if you've a passing interest in blasting chumps and don't fancy dropping 50 quid for the privilege, *Blacklight: Retribution* is a more than serviceable option.

DETAILS

FORMAT: Playstation 4
OTHER FORMATS: PC
ORIGIN: US
PUBLISHER: Zombie Studios
DEVELOPER: Sony
PRICE: Free
RELEASE: Out now
PLAYERS: 1-16
ONLINE REVIEWED: Yes



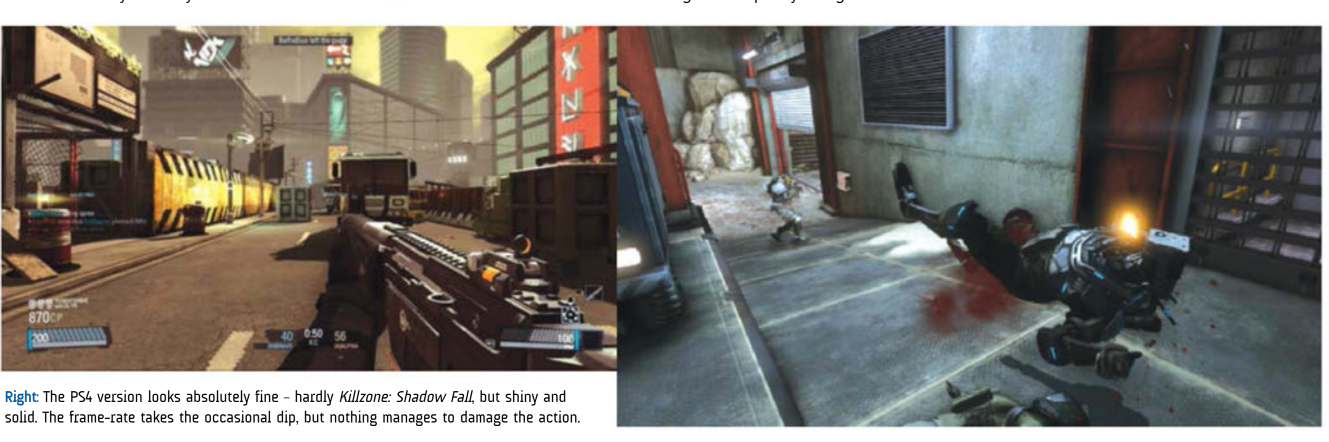
FINGERPRINT

WHAT MAKES THIS GAME UNIQUE

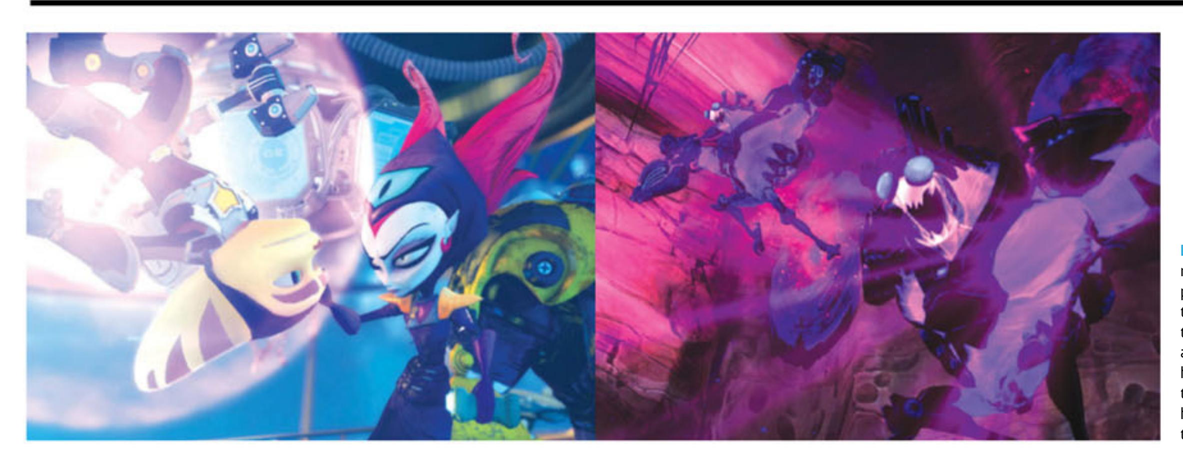
RENT-A-KILL: You can use in-game currency or real-world money to rent items in the game to try them out before investing properly.

VERDICT 7/10

WELL-MADE, COST-EFFECTIVE GUNPLAY



Right: The PS4 version looks absolutely fine – hardly *Killzone: Shadow Fall*, but shiny and solid. The frame-rate takes the occasional dip, but nothing manages to damage the action.



Left: Vendra and Neftin may be twins, but they're pretty different, though there's a suggestion that Neftin may not have always been the brute he is now. It's revealed that the pair have a sad history that explains their actions.

A FITTING MINIATURE TO END THIS GENERATION

Ratchet & Clank: Nexus

As we enter a new console generation, developers are rounding off sub-series within their franchises in preparation for the bigger, hopefully better versions they'll undoubtedly plan for the PS4 and Xbox One. When it comes to *Ratchet & Clank*, fans will be pleased to know that the end of the *Future* series is, while succinct, a return to the traditional formula.

Everything in this game is a bite-sized flavour of what has appeared before or may (hopefully) appear in future games. The basic but complete story focuses on twin villains who, while stereotypical to their genders – he the gruff, tough guy, she the petite witch – at least actually have a motive for their evil workings. Favourite characters from previous games – like Qwark, Talwyn, and the Smuggler – appear, but only briefly. And even the characteristic humour is toned down to some mild quips from the enemies and only a few typically self-aware jokes from the two main characters themselves.

DETAILS

FORMAT: PlayStation 3
ORIGIN: US
PUBLISHER: Sony Computer Entertainment
DEVELOPER: Insomniac Games
PRICE: £19.99/$29.99
RELEASE: Out now
PLAYERS: 1
ONLINE REVIEWED: N/A

BETTER THAN: RATCHET & CLANK FUTURE: QUEST FOR BOOTY



WORSE THAN: RESISTANCE 3

The traditional platforming and combat takes place across only a few worlds, but those are varied in both gameplay and environmental design. You begin in a spaceship in an asteroid field, where you learn how to use the Gravity Boots that enable you to leap to magnetic surfaces, with that potential to move in all directions making things much more interesting. In a world with tiny islands and gorgeous backdrops you learn how to make gravity streams that float you between two points, which introduces a new kind of environmental puzzle to solve. Puzzles also come in the form of Clank's newly learned ability to travel to an alternate dimension of 2D levels in which you can manipulate gravity to pull him and other objects up, down, left, or right to solve simple objectives.

ENHANCED

IMPROVING ON THE ORIGINAL

THE WINTERISER: The best of the new weapons, this one turns enemies into differently shaped snowmen.
GRAVITY STREAMS: Ratchet can speed along these or slow down to shoot his enemies from the air.

Along with the snappy changes in plot direction, this regular introduction of new mechanics keeps the pace steady throughout the few hours it'll take to finish the story. But each new feature feels underused, at least if you only play through the game once and in the quickest way possible (there's a New Game Plus called Challenge Mode, not to mention a sprinkling of extra content and collectables). Given the budget price, however, it's obvious that this level of content was intentional. Hopefully, *Nexus* is also something of a demo for new features that may appear in future games, and we'll get to see Grav-Streams, proper Jetpacks, the improved weapon upgrade system and more, if and when Ratchet and Clank make it onto the PS4.

VERDICT 7/10
A QUICK JOURNEY THROUGH A FEW FUN FEATURES



Above: Since this game primarily takes place in a "haunted" sector of space, many of the environments are post-apocalyptic in design, overgrown and devoid of inhabitants.

NO THRILLS GOLF SIM THAT AVOIDS HAZARDS

Powerstar Golf

There's not a huge amount to say about *Powerstar Golf* – but don't take that as a damning indictment of the game itself. What Zoë Mode has developed is simple but engaging, requiring little more than aiming the ball in the right direction and hitting A to send it soaring down the fairway. Its courses boast vibrant visuals, while its avatars sport exaggerated features. It shuns the precision of Tiger Woods' stick-waggle whacking. It shuns the imprecision of Kinect's arm-waggle whacking. It is, in earnest, a casual game.

However, what comes as a surprise is its core competitive spirit. You'll find reminders of your friends' achievements pinned to each hole, while a few hundred yards away a seemingly unattainable world record is marked on the green. Beat any one of these challenges and you'll be awarded a healthy XP boost, not to mention extra cash that can be spent in the in-game store.

Here's perhaps the most parboiled aspect of design, the shop itself enabling players to spend money either earned or bought (with real-world cash) on packs of cards. Each of these contains random perks and items – the former can be used once, while the latter earns a permanent place within your inventory. Given the glacial pace in which you earn coins, the very nature of the system is clearly created to encourage users to spend real-world cash on items. However, the fact that it is essentially a lucky dip means that the incentive is non-existent.

Still, the single-player is substantial enough to keep players swinging for quite time. Career mode enables you to progress through the courses on offer without the nuisance of other players interrupting your game, while Free mode lets you enjoy holes unimpeded by scoreboards to get some valuable practice time. More interesting is Rivals mode, which enables players to compete against friends or strangers asynchronously, aiming to beat their best scores across each of the courses on offer.

And that's about it. *Powerstar Golf* doesn't boast a wealth of features or customisable options, nor does it do anything particularly creative with its design. Even the lack of Kinect as a gimmicky incentive fails to elevate it among other more innovative party titles in recent years – in fact, there's nothing noteworthy here to distinguish it from several other titles that already exist on the current gen (most notably, *Everybody's Golf*). Despite its stagnated nature, its inclusive gameplay married to some genuinely involving online features makes it an enjoyable excursion in short bursts. But anyone looking for a more substantial or skill-based party game will be better served elsewhere.

DETAILS

FORMAT: Xbox One
ORIGIN: UK
PUBLISHER: Microsoft Studios
DEVELOPER: Zoë Mode
PRICE: £15.99
RELEASE: Out now
PLAYERS: 1-4
ONLINE REVIEWED: Yes

BETTER THAN

LEE CARVALLO'S PUTTING CHALLENGE



WORSE THAN

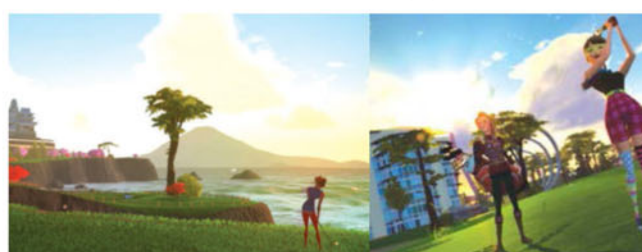


EVERYBODY'S GOLF

CONNECTED

EXPANDING THE GAMEPLAY

EXPANDING THE GAMEPLAY HOLE IN (XBOX) ONE: *Powerstar Golf*'s best feature is the use of online for asynchronous play online. Challenge your friends or strangers to a quick nine holes without them even being online.



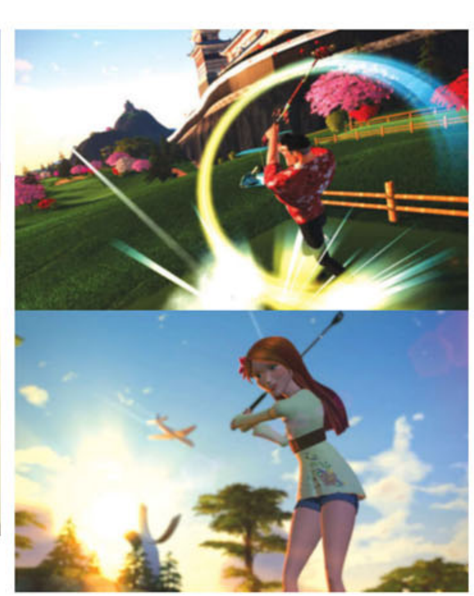
Below: The power gauge requires enough skill to pull off a perfect shot that it feels like a genuine accomplishment when you actually achieve one. However, slice it slightly and the ball can veer off quite unpredictably.

VERDICT 6/10



NOTHING NEW BUT STILL FUN

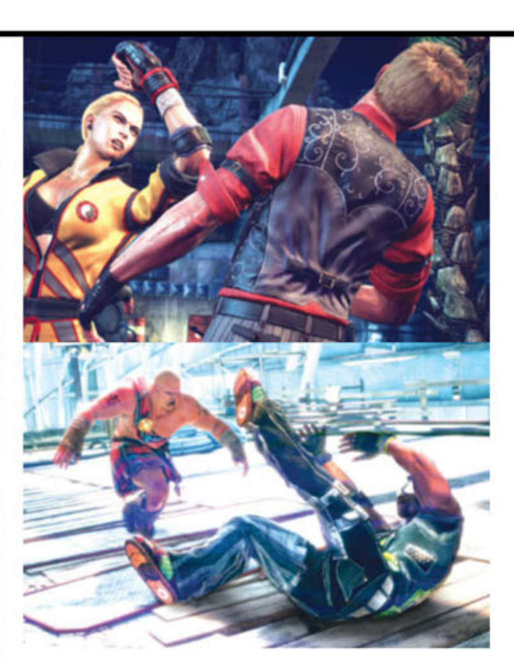




Above: It's a surprise to see that the first golf title to arrive on Xbox One doesn't utilise the improved functionality of Kinect. Although, it's hard to imagine the game retaining any semblance of skill using motion controls over basic button inputs.

Below: Around the arena lie poles and sticks that can be used to create large amounts of damage against your opponents.





DETAILS

FORMAT: Xbox One
ORIGIN: Daoka
PUBLISHER: Ubisoft
DEVELOPER: Belgium
PRICE: £49.99
RELEASE: Out Now
PLAYERS: 1-2
ONLINE REVIEWED: N/A

AS GOOD AS

FIGHTERS UNCHAINED





WORSE THAN

STREET FIGHTER 4

ABOUT AS MUCH FUN AS PUNCHING YOURSELF IN THE FACE

Fighter Within

Despite all the intrusive concerns at its original announcement, Kinect 2.0 has proven to be one of the Xbox One's most impressive features, pretty much fulfilling all the promises that Microsoft first made when the original peripheral was launched. What a pity then that *Fighter Within* nearly manages to unravel all its hard work with a few misplaced punches to the groin.

Concerns become apparent when simply starting a game becomes a mini-game in itself, and not a fun one either. Annoyingly, you punch menus to activate them – presumably because punching is cool. It's wildly inaccurate though and after it constantly failed to register our jabs, we wanted to create a face for Kinect, so that we could punch it.

It gets better with practice, but more horrors await you once *Fighter Within* starts in earnest. While the Story mode does an admittedly good job of introducing you to the various ineffective moves, the plot it's attached to is the sort of twaddle that has been giving the industry a bad name since the Eighties. But hey, this is a fighting game, so who cares if all the characters spout terrible lines, it's the action that's all-important right?

Well Xbox One owners, move along, as there's nothing to see here. There's a nice selection of moves ranging from counters and blocks to kicks, throws and specials but they're all activated with all the finesse of a five-year old walking around in their mother's high heels. Throws in particular can be a nightmare to register, while counters feel more down to blind luck than actual skill. One particular nice mechanic is how you can pull a muscle pose to charge up Ki, which quickly fills three meters, all of which can be activated with the relevant gesture. It's a solid idea that should add a little skill to what is an otherwise dull game, but it's ridiculously overpowered. After completing the main story, we completed the included arcade mode like so: one, stand and build Ki, while taking punches to the face; two, cripple opponent by unleashing fully charged move and three, rinse, lather and repeat. By literally standing still and making a single gesture you can beat the entire game. Admittedly things aren't quite as easy on higher difficulties, but then you're at the mercy of *Fighter Within*'s inconsistent controls anyway.

Even the chaotic Dual mode that enables you to duff up a friend can do nothing to save *Fighter Within*, and it soon becomes apparent that it's nothing more than a shallow tech demo that's as effective as showing off the new tech as its clichéd fighters are original. The end result is that worse type of launch game, the one that does nothing more than makes you question why you bought your expensive console in the first place.

FINGERPRINT

WHAT MAKES THIS GAME UNIQUE

WHO NEEDS FINESSE?: Imagine a game of *Street Fighter 4* where you pressed the hard punch button and executed a light punch instead. That's how special *Fighter Within* is.







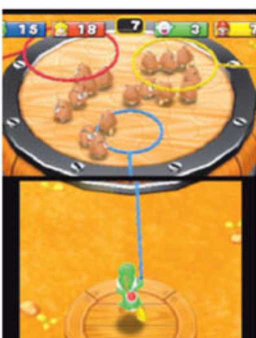
VERDICT 2/10

AN ATROCIOUSLY BAD SHOWCASE FOR KINECT 2.0



Left: Providing you hold the 3DS properly, the gyroscope-based games work extremely well, delivering a variety of different games, from racing around on giant balls to taking photos of specific characters before your opponents.

Left: All the available boards are extremely unsatisfying to play, constantly putting you in difficult situations where the AI rules supreme.





ONE PARTY THAT YOU WILL DEFINITELY NOT WANT TO CRASH

Mario Party: Island Tour

The latter half of 2013 was absolutely cracking for Nintendo, with a string of hit Wii U and 3DS games that reminded you why it has such a strong following with gamers. What a pity then that it kicks off the New Year with this dull, spiteful little oddity. The *Mario Party* series has been entertaining and annoying gamers for the best part of 16 years now, but it's high time someone at Nintendo put the franchise out of its misery, because this latest offering is a terrifically bland piece of software that lacks the imagination and variety that the series first offered when it made its N64 debut way back in 1998.

The biggest issue with *Island Tour* is just how incredibly nasty the AI is, turning a single player game into a maddeningly unfair experience where you may as well not be playing. We lost count of the times we lost dice rolls while the computer AI possessed all the luck of a clover-wearing Irishman sporting a pair of rabbit feet. No matter what the circumstance, the spiteful in-game AI is always one step ahead of you, constantly ready to punish you for being so foolish as to play *Mario Party* on your lonesome.

Things certainly clear up when you play with friends, as you're all on the same unlevel playing field, but it still hurts when you realise that it's blind luck and not actual skill that determines the overall winner, and you end up feeling that you've been smacked in the face by a giant blue *Mario Kart* shell. Even when you're playing with a full set of friends (made possible by the neat trick of all playing off a single cartridge) problems continue to appear, while the lack of online play is unforgivable in today's day and age.

The mini-games in *Island Tour* may number over 80, but many of them are extremely tedious to play through in their entirety, again relying on simple luck, rather than actual skill. For every entertaining mini-game on offer there are at least five more that feel as if they've been dialled in by the developers, and it makes for a painfully dull experience, lacking the fun and wackiness of earlier games in the franchise. The best ones make use of the 3DS's touch screen and gyroscope controls, but they're few and far between, meaning you end up with simple 'knock them of the platform' games or 'press the button as fast as you can until something happens and a little bit of you dies inside'.

The seven available board games are dull in the extreme, while only Bowser's Tower and the StreetPass mini-games show any of the imagination that the series was once known and loved for. Even the former becomes a dull grind though. This is a real party pooper.

DETAILS

FORMAT: 3DS
ORIGIN: Japan
PUBLISHER: Nintendo
DEVELOPER: Nd Cube
PRICE: £34.99
RELEASE: 17 January (Japan: Out now/US: Out now)
PLAYERS: 1-4
ONLINE REVIEWED: No



ENHANCED
IMPROVING ON THE ORIGINAL

ONE CARTRIDGE, MANY FRIENDS: By far the most impressive thing about *Mario Party: Island Tour* is the ability to download the game on to three other 3DSs. It makes for an instant party.

VERDICT 4/10
MARIO PARTY WITH ITS SOUL RIPPED OUT

Left: It's hard to praise something like 'scalable UI' in a screenshot, but that is really one of the *Enhanced Edition*'s more ideal features, meaning you're no longer restricted to playing this exceptional RPG in a barbaric 800x600 resolution.

Right: If you've played *Baldur's Gate II* before you'll certainly appreciate revisiting memorable characters and locales again. It remains one of the all-time greats, and though its remake fails to inspire as it should, it is nonetheless captivating.

'FOOL ME TWICE, WATCH IT – I'M HUGE!'

Baldur's Gate II: Enhanced Edition

When we reviewed the remake of the original *Baldur's Gate*, we were full of praise. This was a game made with the developer's keen attention to detail, a whole host of improvements and a number of tweaks and changes that made it a worthy play through, even for the most diehard of *Baldur's Gate* fans. Even in spite of its flaws it was possible to overlook those – many of which have now been resolved – in favour of the fact that this was a true classic revitalised with real passion. *Baldur's Gate II: Enhanced Edition* doesn't share a similar fate.

The problem is that the previous remake rebuilt the entire world out of – in essence, anyway – the *Baldur's Gate II* engine, and outside of those far-reaching changes (even at the time the changes with the sequel were pretty dramatic) it seems the latest just doesn't offer the same level of overhaul. The engine itself doesn't really offer much new, at least nothing as noticeable as the last, and while the same level of tweaks reappear it doesn't provide a similar level of depth – especially since *Baldur's Gate II* felt like much more of a linear experience that its predecessor. Undoubtedly this is a great game – one of the best RPGs ever made, in fact – and for that alone it ought to be played, but this is a review of the *Enhanced Edition* and in that sense, there's just not enough to praise.

The inclusion of a new Black Pits, for example, shows a real lack of ingenuity. Though its addition in the original remake did enough to feel worthwhile, here it feels a lot like more of the same. Even the four new characters fail to provide much in the way of content outside of their related side-quests. Both are valued additions, don't let that be mistaken, but there could've been more – there should've been more – when 'all' that was being added was a rejigged engine and a few characters.

Perhaps that's undermining the work of Beamdog and Overhaul Games, and to its credit the developer has done an exceptional job of porting an aging classic to modern devices. It may suffer from odd bugs, but this is a game that will have few problems running on modest modern PCs. The scaling UI, in particular, will see great use on a wide-range of devices. That is *great* stuff. But gamers don't notice scaling UI, gamers notice content – and in that regards the higher price of *Baldur's Gate II: Enhanced Edition* doesn't seem to correlate to the 'new' in this remake. As a classic RPG with some of the best writing and purest example of *D&D* mechanics in a videogame you really need to play this, but as a 'remake' this needs more work to be worthy of the same praise as its older brother.

DETAILS

FORMAT: PC
OTHER FORMATS: iOS, Android
ORIGIN: US
PUBLISHER: Atari
DEVELOPER: Beamdog
PRICE: £24.95
RELEASE: 15 November 2013
PLAYERS: 1-6
MINIMUM SPEC: 512 MB, OpenGL 2.0 Compatible GPU, 1GHZ CPU
ONLINE REVIEWED: No

BETTER THAN

SHADOWRUN RETURNS

WORSE THAN



BALDUR'S GATE: ENHANCED EDITION

WORLDWIDE

TAKING GAMING ONLINE

ROLE PLAYING: The previous *Enhanced Edition* suffered from issues surrounding the multiplayer on launch, and mercifully we didn't have quite as many this time around. Hopefully it will remain stable.

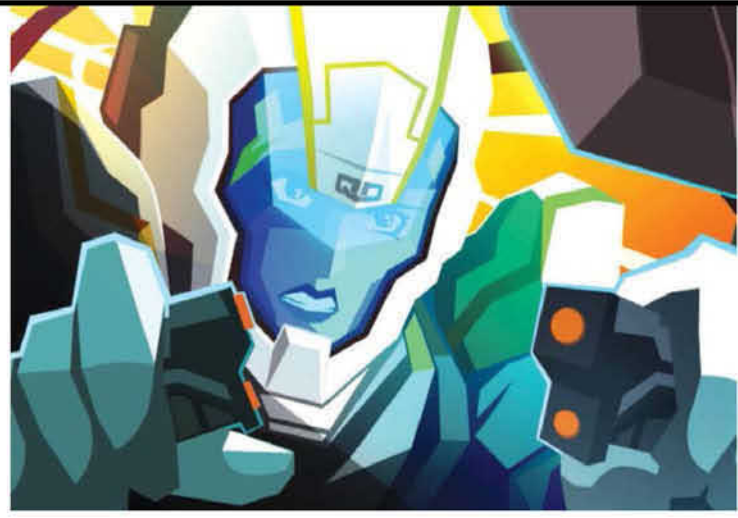
VERDICT 7/10

A GENUINE CLASSIC LACKING ENOUGH IMPROVEMENT

IN SPACE NO ONE CAN HEAR YOU PRESS RESTART

Velocity Ultra





Left: Unlike most shooters, *Velocity Ultra* does actually allow you to touch the sides. It's just as well, really, since many of the levels require precise timing when teleporting, and being as close to the edge as possible will help.

There was a time – not all that long ago – when something like *Velocity Ultra* wouldn't have had anything in the way of recognition, ignored by the masses as little more than a forgettable digital game. But as the twilight years of the current generation waned, gamers looked to indies to reignite their passions away from the exhaustive hyperbole that had become triple-A gaming. *Velocity Ultra* is perhaps one of the best examples of this new-wave of gaming, distilling gaming into its purest form yet remaining as compelling as a 20-hour epic from BioWare.

Velocity Ultra is a clever little spin on the top down shooter, blending elements of puzzle solving and keen reflexes beyond just the ability to blast away enemies. This isn't your bullet-hell kind of deal, though; *Velocity Ultra* tests your ability to react more than anything else. Take your ship's ability to teleport, for example; a fairly innocuous concept, perhaps, but a necessary means of transportation. The teleport is handled through a separate cursor, activated with a single button press. It's a little awkward to grasp at first – and it will almost certainly be the cause of a handful of unfair deaths even late into the game – but it still manages to bring a whole new element to the genre. This is especially true in the speed-based levels, which focus less on surviving and more on getting to the end of the stage within a pretty strict time limit.

Other levels instead opt for a more cerebral approach, tasking you with utilising your ship's respawn function – a feature by which you can specify a place you can return to at any time – to navigate a series of tunnels to activate particular switches in order. These puzzles aren't exactly tasking, but they help break up the stages somewhat by including a little more thought and strategy to an otherwise simplistic game. All this is packaged into a three-grade rating system, and to get that perfect three-star score you'll need constant practice. That's where *Velocity Ultra*'s compulsive nature comes in, and one wrong slip up – however minor – will mean a fairly loud curse word and a forced restart. It is the gamer's way, after all. Sometimes the controls can be a little finicky – particularly surrounding the supplementary abilities – and it does have pretty basic presentation, which can deter some of the enjoyment you might get from *Velocity Ultra*. But when all is said and done, *Velocity Ultra* won't set you back very much and give it just the briefest of opportunities and it will manage to keep you hooked for hours.

DETAILS

FORMAT: PlayStation 3
OTHER FORMATS: PS Vita
ORIGIN: UK
PUBLISHER: Curve Studios
DEVELOPER: FuturLab
PRICE: £6.49
RELEASE: Out now
PLAYERS: 1
ONLINE REVIEWED: N/A

BETTER THAN — SINE MORA



AS GOOD AS — RESOGUN

ENHANCED

IMPROVING ON THE ORIGINAL

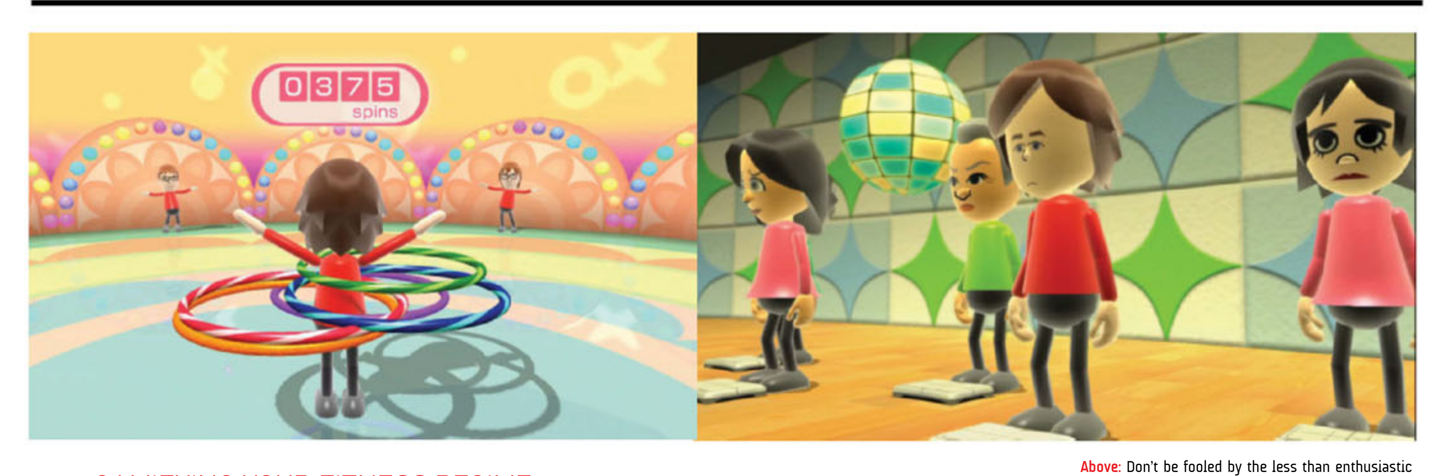
SUPER SIZE: *Velocity Ultra* is actually a high-res remake of a PS Mini, and has swapped out 8-bit visuals for something a little more up-to-date. As much as the effort should be praised, the 8-bit design had a bit more appeal.

VERDICT 8/10
CLASSIC GAMING, REVITALISED

Below: Score attack games frequently can't hook us in the way they want to, but *Velocity Ultra* helps regain that age-old passion. If you really find no enjoyment in bettering yourself then, truth be told, this isn't the game for you.







Above: Don't be fooled by the less than enthusiastic expression on this Mii's face, many of *Wii Fit U*'s mini-games are genuinely enjoyable.

GAMIFYING YOUR FITNESS REGIME

Wii Fit U

***Wii Fit U* is a strange title to evaluate, being as it's not so much a game, as it is an attempt to gamify a fitness regime – albeit a rather easy-going one.** That's not to say that mini-games aren't an essential component of *Wii Fit U*, because they certainly are. The point is that those games aren't just about having fun, they're about sugar-coating a half-decent workout and motivating you by creating the impression that you can always improve.

When it comes to the latter, *Wii Fit U* is an absolute success. Whether you've just finished a yoga stretch, a muscle workout, a skiing mini-game or a virtual step-aerobics class, the game is constantly dishing out star ratings, points, scores and other statistics that lead you to think, "I reckon I could beat that". Add to that a pervading sense that your efforts are contributing to some greater goal, courtesy of frequent reminders about how many calories you've burned and the game's tracking of your overall progress, and you have yourself a title that makes you feel compelled to strive for betterment.

As to whether the mini-games and activities themselves exert the same pull, that's another matter. While every game within *Wii Fit U* is incredibly simple, many of them are also very enjoyable. However, there is a lack of consistency in terms of the quality on offer, with some mini-games offering little entertainment value and others feeling a little redundant when it comes to offering what you would call a genuine workout. In fact, it's often those that make use of the Wii U's gamepad that are weakest. It's as if Nintendo felt like they had to shoehorn in the console's key feature one way or another.

Wii Fit veterans may also be disappointed to find that many of the activities in this sequel are taken straight from the original *Wii Fit*. The degree to which that's a problem will depend on what you want from *Wii Fit U*. If you're a newcomer, or someone happy with getting the same core experience with a few new additions, then great. Just don't expect *Wii Fit U* to provide a radically new experience.

You could question the value of *Wii Fit U* as a fitness tool, but it's important to remember that this game isn't made to cater to hardcore fitness freaks. *Wii Fit U* is intended to make fitness fun and accessible and, for the most part, that's exactly what it does. With a suitably wide array of activities on offer, an expertly crafted feedback loop, and, yes, even a few exercises that will put you to the test, *Wii Fit U* is an admirable attempt at melding physical activity with light-hearted play.

DETAILS

FORMAT: Wii U
ORIGIN: Japan
PUBLISHER: Nintendo
DEVELOPER: In-house
PRICE: £49.99
RELEASE: Out now
PLAYERS: 1-8
ONLINE REVIEWED: N/A

AS GOOD AS: WII FIT



WORSE THAN: WII SPORTS RESORT

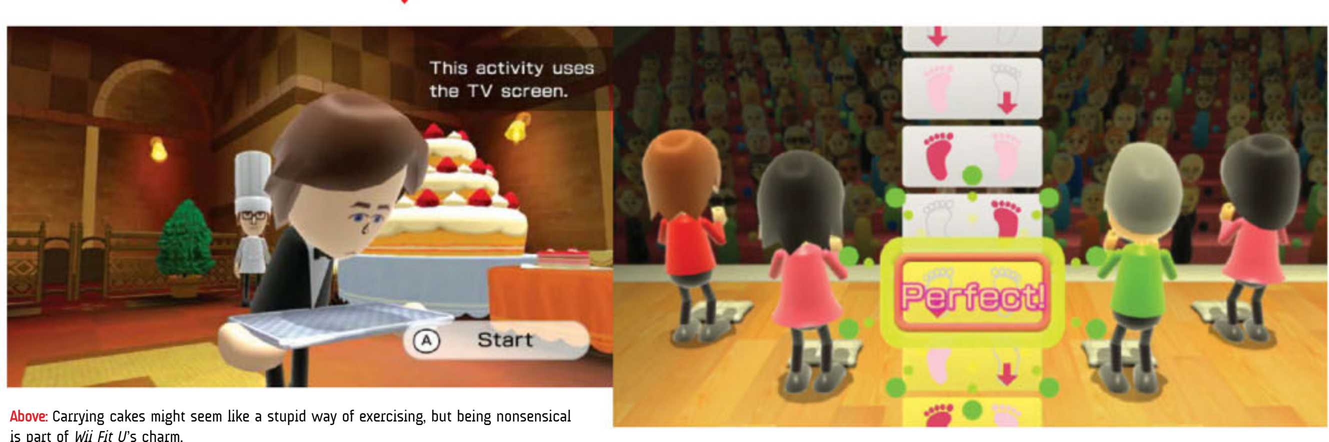
MISSING LINK

WHAT WE WOULD CHANGE

GAMEPAD GAMING: The Wii U is lacking games that demonstrate why the console's gamepad is a compelling feature. It's a real shame that Nintendo failed to do that with *Wii Fit U*.

VERDICT 7/10

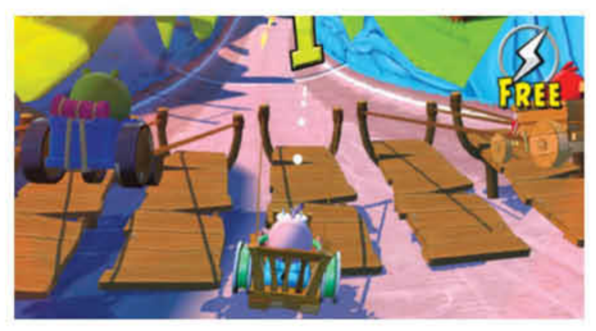
DESPITE INCONSISTENCIES, IT MAKES FITNESS FUN



Above: Carrying cakes might seem like a stupid way of exercising, but being nonsensical is part of *Wii Fit U*'s charm.

NOT EVEN THE BIRDS CAN SAVE THIS CASH-IN FROM QUICKLY GOING STALE

Angry Birds Go!





Left: You'll get a one-use power-up to use in each race, but after that you'll have to rely on your own racing skills and some slow opponents if you want to win.

The *Angry Birds* franchise is branching out for the first time. Sure, in the last few years Rovio has freshened up its series by taking the birds to space and adding licensed material from *Star Wars*, but ultimately flinging avian creatures was always a constant.

It is a shock, then, that Rovio has added a kart racing game to the franchise. *Angry Birds Go!* gives the popular characters the full 3D treatment, with rather pretty results. It won't, of course, dazzle in the same way as *Infinity Blade III*, but the bright, colourful style will certainly appeal to younger players, and the cartoon animations are cute.

Steering is handled either with taps of the screen or by tilting your device left and right, but racing is very basic. You'll accelerate automatically, and with no brake button the emphasis is on simplicity. Jumps and shortcuts add some variety to the tracks, which are interesting enough but too slow to unlock. Aside from a single-use power in each race there are no *Mario Kart*-style weapons here, and it makes races rather dull. Thankfully, there are several different game types available, from battles against AI opponents to missions that involve beating a certain time while avoiding blocks, or collecting pieces of fruit. The difficulty increases slightly as you progress, but we never found ourselves truly challenged.

Spending, sadly, is a running theme in *Go!* As you race, you'll be rewarded with coins that you can use to upgrade your kart. These upgrades get progressively more expensive, and you'll soon find that it will take three or four races to add another skill point. That is, unless you're willing to pull your credit card out. In-app purchases aren't just present in *Go!*, they're actively encouraged at every opportunity. From the moment you pick your first kart you're offered fully-upgraded beasts that can be bought for up to £69/$99. Yes, you read that right; there are karts in this title that cost more than full PS4 and Xbox One titles. Even if you splash out, though, each character only has enough energy to complete five races before needing some time to recharge. Unless you buy more gems to recharge your character more quickly, you'll be twiddling your thumbs at regular intervals.

And it's this that really kills the game in the end. The tracks aren't engaging enough to bring back any but the youngest players, and the constant barrage of in-app purchases makes this feel more like a marketing campaign than a high-quality title. It might be for kids, but ultimately it feels too much like a cheap cash-in to be worthy of your attention.

DETAILS

FORMAT: iOS
ORIGIN: Finland
PUBLISHER: Rovio Entertainment
DEVELOPER: In-House
PRICE: Free
RELEASE: Out Now
PLAYERS: 1
ONLINE REVIEWED: N/A

BETTER THAN — SHREK KART HD



WORSE THAN — GARFIELD KART

MISSING LINK

WHAT WE WOULD CHANGE

MONEY, MONEY, MONEY: We'd rather pay £5-10 for the game and have everything unlocked than endure this in-your-face business model.



VERDICT 5/10
THIS IS 'CASHING IN' ON A GRAND SCALE

Right: Aside from the characters, the only real reference to the *Angry Birds* franchise is the slingshot launcher that is used to begin each race.





Left: This is poor Ray. Throughout the game, nothing really goes his way. You even end up wandering around his broken, disturbed subconscious at one point. This gives a troubling and sympathetic look into his mind… which we may have been better off without.

Right: We don't think we've seen anything quite like *Stick It To The Man!* before – the clunky cardboard art direction really works in its favour and the game shows an effective level of self-awareness of its flat planes.

STICKER-SLAPPING FUN

Stick It To The Man!

In the same way *LittleBigPlanet* takes the handicraft aesthetic and builds a game out of it, and in the same way *Tearaway* uses papercraft to inform its level design, *Stick It To The Man!* takes the flat planes of a cut-up cardboard world and infuses a dark and distinct personality. Ray suffers from an unfortunate accident early on, granting him the ability to summon a giant, tethered pink hand-thing out of his head. This grants him pseudo-telekinetic powers – no-one else can see the hand, and it drives Ray to distraction.

The floating hand offers interesting mechanics alongside the scrolling 2D world – navigation is sped up by grabbing on to pins and using them as tether points, and Ray has the ability to peel stickers off people or items and slap them, quite unceremoniously, onto other people's heads, interactive objects or animals. The game is a curious mix of platformer and puzzler, fusing traditional platform-hopping with point-and-click inspired brainteasers which get progressively trickier as the game goes on.

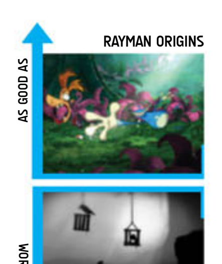
The platforming sections feel more trial-and-error than skill-based, though; the usual pattern revolves around Agents of the eponymous Man guarding certain areas of the level, with Ray having to lead them elsewhere before taking advantage of pins to get ahead of them. These sequences break up the flow of puzzle-solving, but they still end up feeling a little trite at times. Add the floaty and imprecise mechanics of the hand into that mix and some of the chase sections can end up taking far longer than we think they should.

The gameplay itself feels like it comes second to the title's inane story, though. There's a lot of back and forth through the levels, and to progress you *have* to read people's minds (done by fondling people's brains with Ray's extendable psychic arm). The puzzles often require obscure and unpredictable solutions, and it's in setting up these little quests the game really excels. Written by Ryan North, every character is brought to life and given a concise backstory and motivation.

There's a surprising amount of versatility to the characters, too; some have stories that make you actively *hate* who they are, and some are quite relatable, but most of them are just a bit tragic and unfortunate. *Stick It To The Man!* feels like the writers of *Garth Marenghi's Darkplace* sat down with Matt Groening to make a spiritual successor to *Paper Mario*. The game is a refreshing twist on the puzzle genre, and something we haven't seen enough of on PSN. If you're starved for a good 2D puzzler after last year's offerings of *Machinarium* and *Limbo*, we reckon *Stick It To The Man!* will be a perfect fit alongside those two on your digital PSN shelf.

DETAILS

FORMAT: PS3
OTHER FORMATS: PSVita
ORIGIN: Sweden
PUBLISHER: Ripstone
DEVELOPER: Zoink
PRICE: £9.99
RELEASE: Out now
PLAYERS: 1
ONLINE REVIEWED: N/A



SYNTHESIS

BRINGING GENRES TOGETHER

PLAT-AND-CLICK: The game is, at its heart, a point-and-click puzzle, wrapped up in vague platform stylings. It takes the best of both genres and slams them brusquely and unforgivingly together.

VERDICT 7/10

ECCENTRIC, SOLID PUZZLER- A PERFECT MATCH FOR PSN

A RETURN TO THE BAD OLD DAYS

Regular Show: Mordecai & Rigby In 8-Bit Land

Despite at its heart being a platformer/shooter with a simplified retro style, this is not a game for kids, this is a game for people that remember shoving 20ps into machines, having their asses handed to them and loving it. Unfortunately, this nostalgia kick is really all *8-Bit Land* has going for it. Your three lives are doled out *Mario*-style, one at a time. One hit from an offscreen laser, one shoddy hitbox on a snail, and it's back to the start of the level. There are checkpoints, but they're poorly placed, and far too infrequent for most modern gamers. Which is probably the point, but there's making a funny little reference to retro games and then there's rendering your own game tediously and unnecessarily grindy to make that funny little reference at all.

This need for such care gives the whole game a very stop-start feel. When platformers exist like *Super Meat Boy*, requiring you to assess what you see and speedily act with pinpoint accuracy, or *Rayman Legends* with its beautiful flowing gameplay, returning to this sort of irritating, poorly hit-boxed affair seems ridiculous. Despite the timer for extra cash, you have to settle into position, do a bit of scoping the place out, then press on. And even with the dull care that you have to take the first few times you play a level, it's likely that a stray shot or punch will catapult you back to the start.

The show itself is a great kids programme, sharp and funny, but this is a disappointment. The only interesting mechanic is the ability to switch between Mordecai and Rigby instantly, with their respective double jump and crawling abilities, but even this, while executed well, only adds to the stop-start nature of the gameplay. We're left wondering who exactly the audience is supposed to be, considering that most fans of the show will be easily frustrated younger gamers, and that older gamers have seen platformers evolve beyond this.

DETAILS

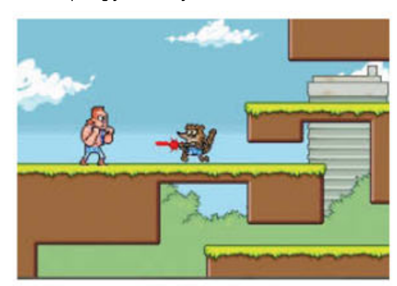
FORMAT: 3DS
ORIGIN: US
PUBLISHER: Namco Bandai
DEVELOPER: WayForward Technologies
PRICE: £29.99
RELEASE: Out now
PLAYERS: 1-4
ONLINE REVIEWED: N/A

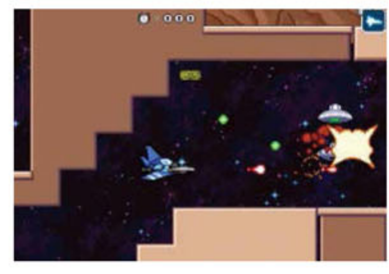




A DULLY UNFAIR PLATFORMER, WORTH A LOOK FOR SADISTS

Below: There are a mix of different gameplay styles – top-down, shooter, etc – culminating in the fourth and final world requiring you to use your skills in all of them.





UNACCEPTABLE! ONE MILLION YEARS DUNGEON!

Adventure Time: Explore The Dungeon Because I Don't Know!

DETAILS

FORMAT: PS3
OTHER FORMATS: 3DS, PC, Xbox 360, PC
ORIGIN: US
PUBLISHER: Namco Bandai
DEVELOPER: WayForward Technologies
PRICE: £34.99
RELEASE: Out now
PLAYERS: 1
ONLINE REVIEWED: N/A



***Adventure Time* is a show rich with creative potential, and you just can't help but wish that something more had been done with it than a by-the-numbers dungeon crawler.** There are a host of recognisable characters here, and a few knowing nods to the series like Marceline the Vampire Queen able to suck in any red projectiles launched her way, but kitten guns and waving snails do little to disguise the fact that this is neither a game that caters well to fans nor a particularly good dungeon crawler.

Every now and then the levels change theme, like Ice King's frosty territory or Princess Bubblegum's labs, but ultimately it takes far too long to progress anywhere, and you'll be bored of one setting by the time it moves on to the next. Every ten levels gives you a boss level, but the controls are so flaky that what should be a welcome break from the norm becomes something much more frustrating. It's a real shame.

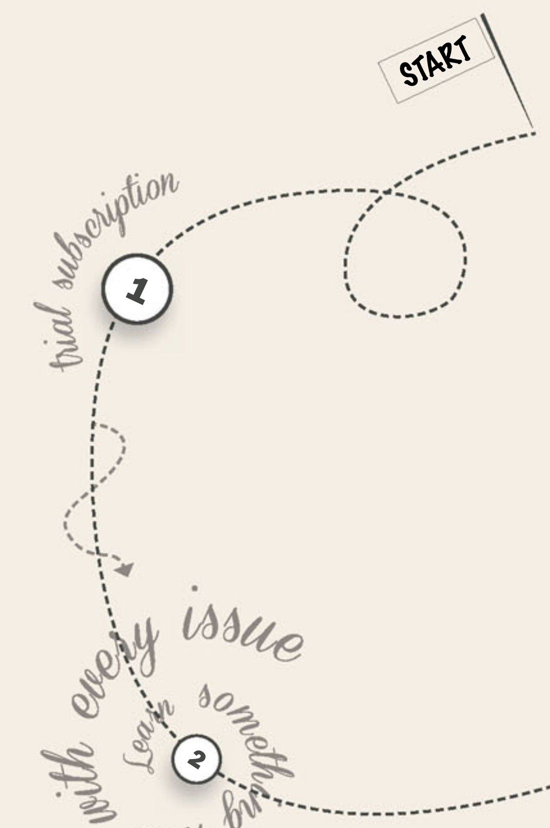
Very little changes, despite how far you progress. One of the most important aspects to any good dungeon crawler is getting excited about loot, but when you're finding the same items over and over again, it just doesn't matter. Actually, nothing here matters. You can't level yourself up; you can only collect treasure to increase a handful of stats. You have one attack and one special move and that's it. There's little to no skill involved in making your way through the dungeons; it's only playing solo that there's any kind of challenge, but dungeon crawlers are all about travelling through with friends, and there's nothing here for that either. Like *Mordecai & Rigby In 8-Bit Land*, this game has a lot of the right ideas in place, but little of the execution needed to make this game not feel like a cheap tie-in. If it really wanted to offer something more to newcomers or to fans, there would be a quicker progression with the minimal story, more of the retro cutscenes (which are, to be fair, excellently voice-acted), and either fewer levels or a wider variety of them. It's not broken, it's just dull. A disservice to the excellent franchise.

Below: At its best, fans of the show might have a moment of warm recognition soon beset with tired indulgence.

VERDICT 3/10

FANS OF THE SHOW MIGHT RAISE A SMILE AND THAT'S IT

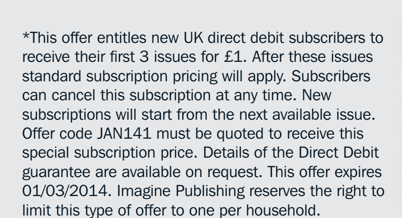
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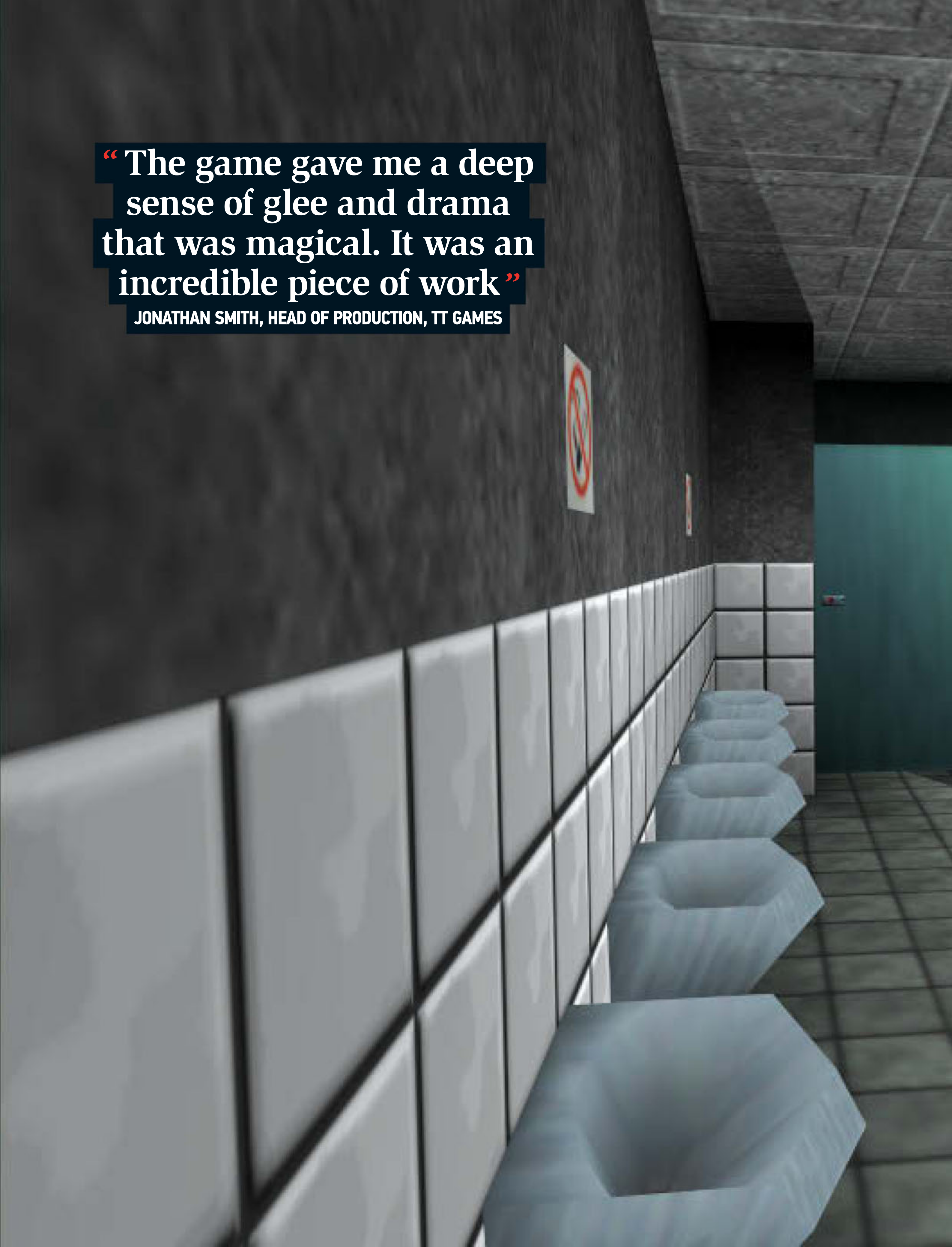
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"The game gave me a deep sense of glee and drama that was magical. It was an incredible piece of work"

JONATHAN SMITH, HEAD OF PRODUCTION, TT GAMES



WHY I ♥...

GoldenEye

JONATHAN SMITH, HEAD OF PRODUCTION, TT GAMES

“*I love* GoldenEye *on the Nintendo 64. It gave me days of true challenge – to score all of the ‘cheat’ times on each of the levels took a lot out of me, physically and emotionally, but it’s an achievement I remain proud of. It’s an experience I am incredibly grateful to Martin Hollis and his team for; the game gave me a deep sense of glee and drama that was magical. It was an incredible piece of work.*”

RETRO

NO.143 JANUARY 2014



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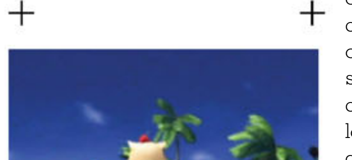
BEHIND THE SCENES

FINAL FANTASY X

The first full 3D Final Fantasy game brought the franchise into the modern age. Producer Yoshinori Kitase recalls its creation to **games**™ as this modern classic prepares for its HD re-release…

Released: July 2001
Format: PlayStation 2
Publisher: Squaresoft
Developer: In-house

KEY STAFF
Yoshinori Kitase, director;
Kazushige Nojima, co-writer;
Nobuo Uematsu, composer





EVOLUTION IS ABOUT risk. When *Final Fantasy X* introduced voice-acting and proper 3D to the heavily story-based series upon its release in 2001, it risked moving away from the traditional *Final Fantasy* paradigm of a world map and scrolling text that had defined the franchise since its late Eighties conception. Yet it was a risk the franchise had to take on the new PlayStation 2 hardware, and one that producer Yoshinori Kitase had been considering since the team brought Squall's quest to kill the Sorceress Ultimecia to life in the series' eighth instalment.

"Since the time we were making *Final Fantasy VIII*, the visuals in *Final Fantasy* had been getting more and more realistic and I was feeling more and more dissatisfied at the fact there were no voices to go with it," reveals Kitase. When we ask Kitase what he wanted to accomplish in bringing *Final Fantasy X* to the PS2 that he wasn't able to previously, the answer is pretty simple: "Definitely the implementation of voice acting."

Yet the voice-acting in *Final Fantasy X* would ultimately be contentious in the West, and would serve to disguise the game's other monumental achievements in establishing what the next stage of the RPG should become on the PlayStation 2. *Final Fantasy X* came along two years after *IX*, the final entry of the series on PSone. Whereas *IX* had been mostly developed by creator Hironobu Sakaguchi's ill-fated Square team out in Hawaii, *Final Fantasy X* would be made by the same team that created *VII* and *VIII* – the two biggest commercial entries to date and perhaps the two most loved by the fan base – and both its character design and world creation would reflect that.

Final Fantasy X was a bold sequel in its choice of setting and scenario. *VII* went for a sci-fi/fantasy story, *VIII* focused on a world infused by both outlandish fantasy and European architecture and *IX* was a deliberate throwback to the medieval derring-do that defined earlier entries on the NES and SNES. *X* went for a tropical backdrop, where nature is allowed to run rampant, populated areas are colourful and the absence of major cities is literally written into the lore of the game.

The entire mythos of the world is defined by Sin, the game's primary antagonist; an enormous mythical creature that has forever brought destruction into the populated areas of Spira, *Final Fantasy X*'s world. At the start of this tale, we meet Tidus, hero of the story, who resides in the glorious hi-tech metropolis of Zanarkand, and whose long-absent pseudo-abusive father is a source of great conflict for the character. After meeting a mysterious spirit-child and his father's friend, Auron, Sin destroys Zanarkand, swallowing Tidus and Auron and seemingly transporting them into another world where Zanarkand was destroyed 1,000 years ago.

As Tidus washes up on the island of Besaid, he learns that the majority of the populace are god-fearing and consider advanced technology to be unholy, swearing allegiance to the faith of Yevon. They've all lost something to Sin, and are taught that adhering to the faith's teachings will protect them from this unstoppable entity. They're indoctrinated into thinking they deserve Sin, that the unclean history of humanity warranted Sin's creation as a pan-global penance for all to suffer.

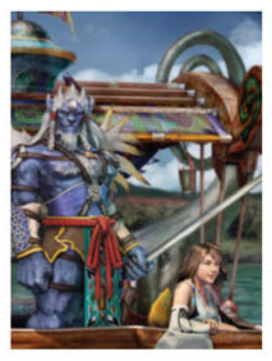
"Sin was created to be a presence in the world that people could simply not avoid, however much they tried," Kitase says. "I created him to represent the kinds of calamitous disasters we have in the real world, such as earthquakes and typhoons that people have no hope of protecting themselves from. Building on that, the world of Spira also has the teachings of Yevon, which give meaning to people's lives in the face of inevitable death (although it turns out that these teachings were actually false in the end). So what I really tried to show in *FFX* was how people behave when they face up to this unavoidable fate. I feel that this theme can be applied to us here in the real world as well."

> **"WE CREATED SIN AS A THREAT THAT WAS FAR ABOVE THE HUMAN LEVEL, IN THE SAME VEIN AS NATURAL DISASTERS LIKE EARTHQUAKES AND TYPHOONS"** YOSHINORI KITASE

Sin can be defeated by a Summoner, a rare individual who, armed with Aeons (*FFX*'s versions of

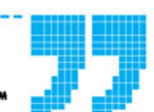






Final Fantasy X is a truly magical experience that will suck you in and spit you out many months later

Play 9.4/10, May 2002



Guardian Forces and Summons, like Ifrit, Bahamut et al) has the potential to defeat the creature – but only temporarily. Sin always comes back. It's a perpetual plague on Spira that scares the people into fearing progress and expanding as a civilisation, leading to conservative philosophies formed around the church's teachings, and vilification of those that reject following Yevon's way.

In the midst of this contemplative mythos is Yuna, an orphan raised in Besaid who wants to follow her father's example and defeat Sin. Tidus meets Yuna just as she begins her pilgrimage through Spira, joining her group of guardians as he searches for answers to what happened to his home of Zanarkand.

For fans who had built up this stereotype of the *Final Fantasy* protagonist being grumpy and cold, the more upbeat Tidus, voiced enthusiastically by James Arnold Taylor, was a strong contrast to the likes of Squall and Cloud from *VIII* and *VII*, respectively – we put this to Kitase when asking about the character's creation. "Just as you point out, *FFVII* and *FFVIII* had very cool, detached and stoic protagonists – *FFIX* was created by a different team based in Hawaii so it is kind of an exception – and so to break the run of this kind of character I created Tidus to be cheerier and more optimistic."

"AS THE PREVIOUS GAMES HAD ONLY HAD TEXT, THE DEPTH OF EXPRESSION AVAILABLE TO US WAS GREATLY BROADENED BY THE INTRODUCTION OF VOICE" YOSHINORI KITASE

■ SEYMOUR, TO THIS day, is one of the most unsettling and dark characters the series has to offer. He is the perfect villain – charismatic, mysterious and powerful – a dangerous mix.

Yuna has the strongest character development in the cast. As a Summoner, she's initially portrayed as deferential to her religion but respectful of everyone's beliefs, a result of dual atheist and religious parentage. As the story progresses, the faith of Yevon starts to unravel – the church itself is revealed to be corrupt, and as Yuna learns she's being manipulated, she joins the rest of her guardians in rebelling against the religious institution. "We tried to depict a heroine who was in no way physically strong but still had a very strong will and determination," Kitase explains. "She has lived her life up until now simply following the creed that she believed in, but when her whole world is shaken, she then has to pick herself up and find a new way forward with her own

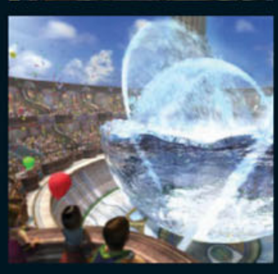
Having A Ball



Blitzball is one of the deepest and most rounded (sorry) mini-games in *Final Fantasy*'s extensive history – the way it seeps into the wider world is admirable, and it extends beyond its spherical stadiums by requiring the player to recruit NPCs to the struggling Besaid Aurochs in an effort to take them to the top of the league. We asked Kitase where the inspiration for the peculiar pastime came from, and how it became such an integral part of the game's story.

"I wanted to include a fictional sport in our fantasy world like [Lucas Films] did with the pod races in *Star Wars Episode 1*. At the time of development we were in the middle of the fervour about the 2002 World Cup, so I based the mechanics of the game itself around football!" While the football influence isn't surprising, the revelation about *Star Wars* pod racing certainly blind-sided us; the fact that the drag races inspired Kitase to such a level is certainly a significant insight into his creative process…





willpower. That was the kind of strength we wanted to show in her."

Yuna, Tidus and the rest of the party each have a different background that shapes their view of the Yevon faith; there's Wakka, Kimahri and Lulu, who each adhere to the teachings strongly and have learned to fear Sin; then, the inverse of that, Yuna's cousin Rikku who joins the party later in the game is a member of the Al Bhed, heretics who choose to believe in progress, while the later return of Auron to the story reveals that he was a victim of the Yevon church in the most unexpected of ways.



FINAL FANTASY GAMES have always involved summons, but *Final Fantasy X* was the first game to centre on them – even the 'hidden' Aeons were vital for dealing with the more aggressive post-game bosses.

It's a complicated setup, but one that's fascinating in its exploration of how faith can be manipulated to control people, and how science and religion's relationship with one another has always been frail. As subject matter goes, it's examined with roughly the same depth as environmentalism in *Final Fantasy VII* – the subject is there to see and only gradually telegraphed over the course of the game.

As events progress in *Final Fantasy X*, Yevon is revealed as a deeply corrupt religion. A big plot twist hangs on Yuna's relationship with one of the leaders of Yevon, Maester Seymour, an outrageously-dressed and darkly sinister figure who plans to merge with Sin to conquer Spira. The group murder Seymour, which turns your party from potential religious saviours to heretics instantly, and gives the story a new energy that makes the second half of the game especially riveting. Hanging over that tale is Tidus's unresolved relationship with his father, Jecht, whose fate is tied to that of Sin.

Sin is a fascinating creature – shaped like a giant whale with the disconcerting sight of an ancient city resting on its crown; it's an unsettling creation, shrouded in mystery and compounded with pervasive menace. "We created Sin as a threat that was far above the human level, in the same vein as natural disasters like earthquakes and typhoons," says Kitase. "Having massive ruins become a part of this creature's physical form helped to visually cement the idea that it is an unimaginably ancient monster on an unprecedented scale. The broad physical shape of Sin is modelled after a whale to give the impression of this being's awesome size as well as its intelligence and otherworldliness."

On a macro level, the game's story is about relationships – the romance between Tidus and Yuna is actually one of the series' weakest to date, a little overcooked by the voice-acting, though the finale manages to bring this thread full circle. Much more interesting is the father-son dynamic of Tidus and Jecht, as the abandoned son lives forever in his father's shadow, and their parallels clearly become a source of anguish for the character. In a departure from the trope of orphans in *Final Fantasy* games, Kitase took a more classic approach in forging Tidus and Jecht's loaded relationship.

"Well this aspect of the story includes the timeless theme of a child trying to exceed the achievements of their parent, which can be found in stories throughout



IN-SPIRA-TION

We spoke to *Final Fantasy X*'s lead artist, Yosuke Naora, about what drove him to create such vivid landscapes



BESAID ISLAND

"In order to very clearly differentiate it from the modern and urbanised Zanarkand, we needed to depict the environment and the people who lived there in a very memorable and striking way and so paid great attention to getting the cultural factors that back that up just right."



LUCA

"We were lucky with this city as the stadium created by Mr Kamikokuryo, the *FFXIII* series art director, immediately gave us a memorable landmark. The design staff also suggested loads of great ideas for things we could do to emphasise that it was a bustling trade port."



MOUNT GAGAZET

"How to depict mountains in order to give the feeling of being on a great journey and the graphics used for them has been a point we paid special attention to, so we lavished an unexpected amount of attention here. Another focus was how we could make it the backdrop for the epic story that takes place there."



ZANARKAND

"The city of Zanarkand had a very strong nautical theme so I gave it the silhouette of a mighty whale. It was important that when the city was attacked it did not just turn out looking like the old Kaiju monster movies, so I emphasised the fantasy elements by incorporating ideas such as the prominence of the water spray."



MACALANIA

"As this area plays host to a very important scene in the story I pulled together lots of different ideas to enhance that. I incorporated a lot of elements that would be instantly recognisable to Japanese people as evoking a tranquil and otherworldly environment."



FAHRENHEIT AIRSHIP

"We actually ran a contest within the team to come up with the base design for the airship. It is, of course, entirely coincidental that the airship's base colours are the same as those worn by the LA Lakers – it was definitely not planned like that!"



ALTHOUGH THE GAME was quite serious, there were a few light-hearted nods back to series tropes in there; Omega Weapon, someone called Cid, cactuars, chocobos and airships all made an appearance.

the ages, such as the ancient Greek legends. Also, the bond between parent and child becomes a key factor in finding the one chink in Sin's armour that allows for this otherwise invincible creature to be defeated."

That's the other thing – there's a major connection between Jecht, Tidus and Sin that Kitase refers to here that is quite simply too complicated to go into, but makes sense within the logic of the universe. What's fascinating is the way Tidus has to accept that his father has pursued an arc of redemption since abandoning him as a child, and reconciling that with his own unfortunate memories.

Such storytelling was a good opportunity for the first *Final Fantasy* with voice acting. "As the previous games had only had text, the depth of expression available to us was greatly broadened by the introduction of voice," says Kitase. "On the other hand, by giving them actual voices the facial expressions of the characters became a lot more important and we needed to put a lot more energy into that than we would have done previously."

On a gameplay level, other major changes were brought to the franchise. Summons are a staple of *Final Fantasy*, and in *X* players were allowed to control and customise them like party members, since gathering these creatures was the goal of Yuna's pilgrimage. With that in mind, Kitase and his team worked to ensure the animations demonstrated some kind of dynamic to elaborate their place in the story.

"We decided to make the process of acquiring each of the Aeons an important element to the main story progression as Yuna goes on her pilgrimage around Spira," says Kitase. "This importance that was placed on them made us take a lot of care in their design. It is a staple of the *Final Fantasy* series that there will be a complex

summoning sequence as each one enters battle, but what differentiates *FFX* from the previous games is the interplay between the summoner (Yuna) and the beast that is called forth. For example, after summoning Valefor, Yuna will occasionally pat its head and this was deliberately put in to express their close relationship. By emphasising this relationship between Yuna and the Aeons we managed to give the final scene of the game where she has to part with them even more impact."

And what a final scene it is. The narrative of *Final Fantasy X* is constructed in such a way that the final payoff has an emotional impact not just on central protagonist Tidus, but also Yuna and the whole crew of Guardians. Revelations abound in the final hour of *Final Fantasy X*, and it has one of the most rewarding final cutscenes on the PS2. The end-game was exactly that – once you approached the Final Aeon, that was it, no going back. There's a classic boss rush that actually feels justified – a rarity in the genre.

It's a credit to *Final Fantasy X* that its narrative is so aware of the mechanics it works with, right down to the emotive and poignant finale. For many gamers, *Final Fantasy X* represents not just a technical highlight of the PlayStation 2, but also an emotional one – every character's personality was well-realised and defined with aplomb, every environment hummed with its own atmosphere and sense of place, every narrative beat hit home with intensity.

Final Fantasy X was a scathing criticism of religious extremism, a celebration of technology, a warning against arrogance and a vital landmark in the wider gaming landscape. Kitase understands this, and seems deeply humbled and affected by player's reactions to his work. "By presenting this game to the world and seeing the reactions of those that played it I feel that my outlook on life has been broadened," he tells us. It's reassuring to know that the impassioned response to *Final Fantasy X* is a two-way relationship – and is perhaps why the game will live on in gaming consciousness for years still to come.

Final Fantasy X/X-2 HD Remaster will be released on 20 March on PlayStation



SIMILARLY TO *FINAL Fantasy VII*'s lifestream, *X*'s Farplane was an otherworld where souls were sent to rest – justifying the existence of fiends, summons, magic and even Tidus. The memorable Moonflow was a gathering place for all 'unsent' souls.

"SEEING THE REACTIONS OF THOSE THAT PLAYED IT, I FEEL THAT MY OUTLOOK ON LIFE HAS BROADENED"

YOSHINORI KITASE



A Realm Reborn

The overwhelming popularity of *Final Fantasy X* has prompted Square Enix to sink years of production into completely remastering the game for PS3 and PSVita – what we've seen of the game so far promises to offer noticeably sharper character models, cleaner HUDs and more defined environments. "The main characters have been completely re-worked from the modelling stage upwards and all the textures on them, such as the skin, have been fully converted to HD to improve the quality," explains Kitase. "The music has been overhauled too – around two-thirds of the tracks in the game have been expertly re-arranged." Kitase also mentioned the game will include content from the International release of the game (that was strangely only released in Japan). "For the players overseas we have included the creature creation mode and Last Mission dungeon from *FFX-2*."







BEST BOSS

STAR WARS KNIGHTS OF THE OLD REPUBLIC PC/Xbox [BioWare] 2003

■ PLENTY OF *Star Wars* games have sought to emulate the trials of becoming a Jedi Knight but no title has quite encapsulated the imaginative spirit of that journey in a tangible manner nor the intricacies of its expanded universe quite like BioWare. Darth Malak himself is a villain worthy of the lore, driven by an arrogance that ultimately leads to his own destruction, and the final confrontation wherein the Sith is confronted by his one-time master is an unforgettable moment bristling with an intimate intensity. The battle itself is equally as tense with Malak drawing power from captive Jedi trapped around the room, forcing the player to free each prisoner before Malak can be taken out. Regretful of his deeds, Darth Malak dies as one of the *Star Wars* saga's most overlooked icons. "In the end, I am nothing."

GAME CHANGERS DOOM

Released: 1993 **Publisher:** id Software **Developer:** id Software **System:** PC



Early in *Doom's* development, id Software toyed with the idea of making the game a straight adaptation of the movie *Aliens*.

We take an in-depth look at how id Software's venerable title changed the face of first-person shooting forever

THERE ARE MOMENTS in videogames that you never forget. For some it's seeing *Mario* run around a three-dimensional world for the first time, while others will recall the first time they shot through their own base so they could attack the incoming waves of *Space Invaders*. Many more, though, will remember the first time they laid eyes on id Software's epic masterpiece *Doom* – a game that changed PC gaming, and the first-person shooter genre, forever.

Doom wasn't the first game of its kind – it essentially rode the blood-spattered coattails of id Software's very own *Wolfenstein 3D*, a riotous blaster that combined aggressive shooting with The Third Reich. But *Doom*'s reach and impact spread far further than *Wolfenstein*, so much so that many gamers actually think the latter came out later.

At one stage *Doom* was everywhere and everyone was playing it. Valve's Gabe Newell once revealed to Bloomberg that when he was working at Microsoft it decided to start checking the computers of customers to find out the extent of Windows' market share. It was done at immense cost to Microsoft and Newell revealed that 20 million people were using Windows. An impressive figure. That is, of course, until you realise that despite those amazing numbers Windows wasn't the most installed application. It was id Software's *Doom*.

The amazing thing here is that *Doom* wasn't even distributed at a retail level; it was simply distributed via bulletin boards and other pre-internet methods. Newell was astonished at the reach a tiny team of developers could have compared to the 500+ staff of Microsoft, calling it a "lightning bolt" moment. Newell decided that a change was coming and games like *Doom* were the future. He eventually left Microsoft to co-found Valve Software in 1996.

So how did *Doom* become so successful? There are numerous reasons, but the fact it was shareware was incredibly important to the game's overall success. After being downloaded (it was originally available from Software Creations BBS and an FTP server at the University Of Wisconsin-Madison) gamers had access to the entire first episode of the epic blaster (it would eventually consist of four full chapters). Once the chapter was complete it was possible to pay for and unlock the rest of the game. The other benefit of shareware was just that:

ESSENTIAL DOOM MODS

DOOM IS WELL KNOWN FOR ITS MODDING SCENE. HERE ARE SOME OF OUR FAVOURITES...



GHOSTBUSTERS

★ Created by "Scuba Steve" Browning, this is a fun mod that features locations from the film as well as weapons that range from the ghost trap to the PKE Meter and Ecto-1. Power-ups come in the form of Twinkies and the Ghostbuster suit, while bosses include Vigo The Carpathian and the Stay Puft Marshmallow man.



ALIENS TC

★ The TC stands for Total Conversion if you're wondering. It's a PWAD that replaces virtually all the resources of the original with new ones. The result is an impressively accurate adaptation of the film, featuring key scenes and a host of recognisable weapons and beasties.



BATMAN

★ Another total conversion and another mod based on an extremely popular existing franchise. It's notable for having a huge number of recognisable bosses that range from Killer Croc and The Joker to Bane and Penguin. While Batman was created for *Doom 2*, we've played it via *Ultimate Doom* just fine.



STAR WARS DOOM

★ There are a number of *Star Wars* mods available, but we've a soft spot for this one. It has lots of samples from the film, a huge number of weapons that are extremely satisfying to use, a great reproduction of the iconic theme tune and lots of stormtroopers to kill. Impressive, most impressive.

it could be shared, reaching countless other people who would in turn share it with their own friends. It created an amazing distribution system that required very little effort from id's 12-strong team.

■■■ And yet it wasn't just *Doom*'s accessibility that made it such a success. It was an incredibly good game, building on the blueprints that John Carmack and the rest of his team had first experienced with *Wolfenstein 3D* and polishing every aspect of it until it shone. *Doom* was light years ahead of the competition from a technical point of view, boasting all sorts of incredible little touches. Full texture mapping, enhanced lighting, rooms of different heights and stairways were just a few of the improvements over *Wolfenstein*, and they allowed for the creation of some incredibly atmospheric levels.

It also helped that the level design in *Doom* was exemplary. *Wolfenstein 3D* often felt that there was little thought to the structure of each stage (made more confusing by the lack of a map); however, the stages of *Doom* had a purpose and really gave you the impression that you were storming through a complex while fighting off the hordes of Hell. And what demonic monstrosities they were. Grotesque, robot spider hybrids, resurrected marines, flame-throwing imps and disgusting cacodemons were just a few of the monsters you faced. Fortunately, your nameless marine was more than capable of dealing with Hell's minions, having access to an array of devastating weapons that ranged from metallic knuckle dusters and a chainsaw to a double-barrelled shotgun and room-clearing BFG 9000.

The huge number of satanic creatures found in the game and the many bloodthirsty ways in which you could dispatch them saw *Doom* constantly courted by controversy, culminating in the infamous Columbine High School Massacre in 1999, when it was discovered that Dylan Klebold and Eric Harris, the duo behind the massacre, had played the game extensively. *Doom* was still banned in Germany as late as 31 August 2011, almost 18 years after its original release, with the panel revealing that it was concerned that "the story played out in *Doom* involved a relentless cycle of gunplay and 'bloody sadistic' violence directed against humans or human-like beings". The same reasons that made it so popular with gamers in the first place.

It wasn't just violence that made id's game so appealing. Networked multiplayer gaming helped establish the now massively popular deathmatch, while the ability to customise and enhance *Doom*'s levels via the use of custom-built WAD files (which stood for Where's All The Data?) ensured that the game's future was only limited by a player's imagination. Sequels and clones quickly followed in the wake of the behemoth that id had created and it's gone on to appear on countless different platforms. It may be 20 years old now, but it remains as fresh as the day it was conceived, delivering an exhilarating slice of hardcore blasting that few of its later peers have managed to match.

DOOM WAS LIGHT YEARS AHEAD OF THE COMPETITION FROM A TECHNICAL POINT OF VIEW

KEY FACTS

■ The original *Doom* programming team consisted of John Carmack, John Romero, Mike Abrash and Dave Taylor.

■ *Doom* has crossed over into numerous forms of media. Comic books, novels, a board game and a movie starring The Rock have all been released.

■ The original version of *Doom* comprised three nine-level episodes. A fourth episode was added for the release of *Ultimate Doom* in 1995.

■ 10 December 2013 marked the 20th anniversary of *Doom*'s release. Various ports would arrive for several years after.



GAME CHANGERS

DOOM THE CONVERSIONS

DOOM PROVED IMMENSELY POPULAR WITH GAMERS, AND AS A RESULT IT WAS PORTED TO A HUGE NUMBER OF DIFFERENT HOME SYSTEMS. HERE ARE THE MOST INTERESTING ONES



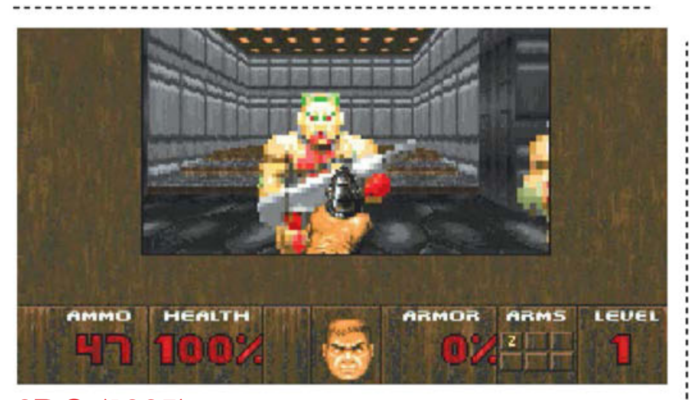
SEGA 32X (1994)

■ WHILE IT'S ENJOYABLE enough, it has quite a few omissions when compared to the PC game. The biggest omission is that it doesn't feature the third episode, which means the BFG 9000 is nowhere to be seen. It suffers from a weak soundtrack, loses a lot of sound effects and lacks most of the bigger monsters from the game. As with many other console versions it's impossible to circle-strafe, meaning its gameplay isn't as slick as it could be.



ATARI JAGUAR (1994)

■ ONE OF THE few trump cards in the Jaguar's library. It's the only home console port at the time that was actually coded by Carmack himself – and it shows. Amazing lighting effects, a super-fast pace and modified maps all help it stand apart, and it enables you to immediately select any weapon at will (the only console version to do so). The decision to map strafing to a single fire button hurts its mobility somewhat, though.



3DO (1995)

■ THE 3DO PORT of *Doom* promised to be spectacular and was based on the Atari Jaguar version. Despite the impressive grunt of the 3DO, it turned out to be an incredibly rushed port that failed to capture the magic of the original. Its biggest issues are the tiny available windows (although two bigger options are available with cheats) and an extremely choppy frame rate when using those bigger screen options.



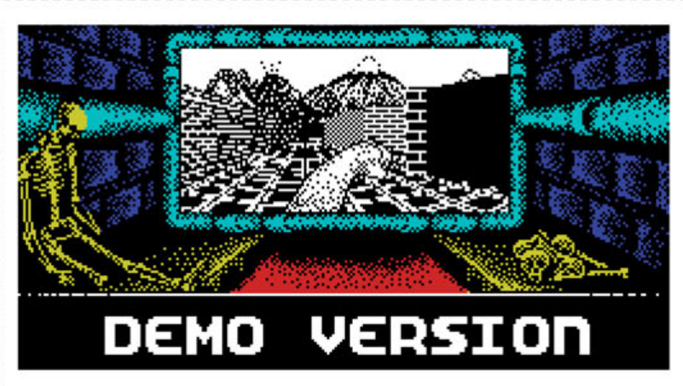
SNES (1995)

■ THE SOUNDTRACK FOR this 16-bit port still sounds fantastic. Unfortunately, SNES *Doom* suffers in many other areas. While it's powered by the SuperFX2 chip, the graphics are very disappointing, with many enemies hard to see when they're in the distance. Add in an erratic frame rate and the lack of circle-strafing and SNES *Doom* is highly disappointing. It did manage to include the cyberdemon and spiderdemon though, so that's good.



PLAYSTATION (1995)

■ THIS IS WIDELY considered to be the best console port and it's hard to argue otherwise, especially as it includes *Doom 2* as well. It's an enhanced version of the Jaguar game with brighter visuals and a slicker pace. It moves at blistering speeds, putting the original to shame. All monsters (barring the Arch-vile) appear, but not in the same numbers as the PC versions.



ZX SPECTRUM (1996)

■ OKAY, SO IT'S not an official port, but we can't not mention this astonishing effort. Created for the Spectrum 128K by Russian developer Digital Reality, it's an insanely impressive piece of work, even if it does run at a slow pace. It's also worth mentioning the superb music that plays throughout. It's obviously lacking when compared to the original, but it still manages to impress.



SEGA SATURN (1997)

■ CONSIDERING HOW GREAT *Quake* is on Saturn, *Doom* is a massive disappointment. It suffers from all sorts of issues, ranging from an extremely choppy frame rate to sluggish controls. It's a port of the PlayStation version, but loses a lot of the slick lighting effects that made it look so moody. The Japanese version of the game is widely considered to be the best version due to slightly better optimisation, but it's still a poor effort.



GAME BOY ADVANCE (2001)

■ THIS SLICK LITTLE GBA release is based on the early console ports, so it's a surprisingly faithful version. It's still missing the same monsters, has green blood, enemy corpses that quickly disappear and numerous other little differences, but it plays well enough. There's still no circle-strafing, but it does boast eight new deathmatch levels. It's worth noting, though, that multiplayer (and packed levels) does cause the game to run extremely slowly.



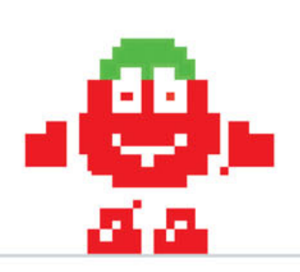
XBOX 360 (2006)

■ THIS IS ONE of the most authentic versions of *Doom*, although this is hardly surprising when you consider the power of the machine that it runs on. It's effectively *Ultimate Doom*, meaning you get all four episodes. It also features four-screen local multiplayer, built-in Achievements, online leaderboards, online multiplayer and slower music. It's an otherwise superb adaptation of the game and is currently available for just £1.99.

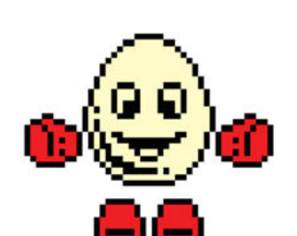


iOS (2009)

■ DESPITE THE FACT that he runs id Software, John Carmack still likes to keep his coding fingers dirty. The end result is this interesting release for iOS, which is an accomplished piece of work (as you'd expect from one of *Doom*'s creators) boasting all the beasties and levels from the original. There's a concession however, and it's a big one: *Doom* is basically a nightmare to play on touchscreen, even with a number of helpful options.







INTERVIEW

THE OLIVER TWINS

The popular and iconic twins from Trowbridge grew out of the bedroom-coding culture of the Eighties to run a development studio with over 200 employees. Speaking directly to Philip on behalf of both, we discover more…

Fascinated by computers and videogames from an early age, Philip and Andrew Oliver were soon embarking on a journey that would encompass a multitude of machines and formats. Hooked, like many, on the burgeoning array of home videogame consoles and software that began to emerge in the early Eighties, the twins soon acquired one of Sinclair's ZX81 computers, devoured its manual and began to program their own virtual adventures. This would transpire to be the first tentative step on a road to a multitude of best-selling games and, ultimately, their own development company. Following the recent closure of Blitz Games, Philip looks back at the twins' enduring legacy and hints at great things to come.

So you began programming on the ZX81?

Yes, and we started with *Pong*-style games and expanded from that. We soon realised, however, that we wanted a computer with more memory, colour, speed and a real keyboard. After doing a paper round we were able in September of 1982 to buy a Dragon 32 which was great for learning to program on.

Did you stop playing videogames?

No, we loved games and always wanted to see new ones, although we were mainly studying them to see what they were doing in terms of new gameplay, graphics and technical tricks. When we got a BBC Model B in 1983 we were introduced to even more games at a time when we were supposed to be doing our O-levels.

Did you code together?

We did everything together. In the early days that meant sharing the computer so we'd often take turns typing our written code into the computer and testing it.

Your first game was the type-in *Road Runner*, for which you were famously paid £50.

It was a top-down vertically scrolling racing game. We'd worked out how to scroll the screen and felt an important part of a type-in should be brevity. Our neat trick with *Road Runner* was to procedurally generate the road, so it was different every time and saved the user having to type in a lot of data. Plus it saved memory.

> **WE MET JEREMY BEADLE, TOMMY BOYD AND ISLA ST. CLAIR, AND EVEN GARY NUMAN, WHO WE'D NEVER HEARD OF!**

And eventually one of your BBC games led to fame on national TV…

It was a strategy game called *Gambit*. We'd done a funny thing to make our submission stand out by including a small woollen pom-

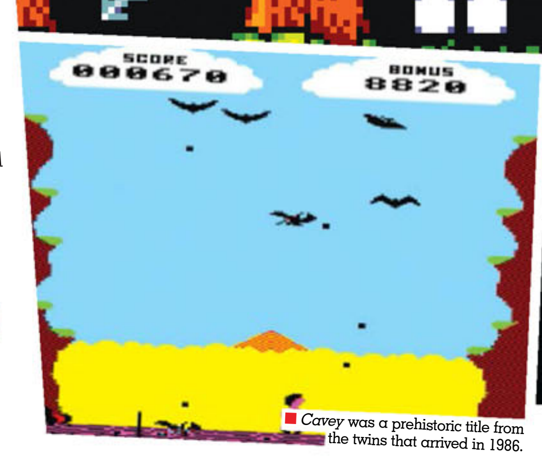
DEVELOPER COMMENTS

I'd encountered Philip and Andrew several times before my time with Blitz, first as a graphic designer at Codemasters where I worked with them on some of the *Dizzy* packaging, and also with my journalist's hat on when I interviewed them several times for the *Official Nintendo Magazine* I edited. They'd instantly made an impression as being very different from most of the other developers we'd visited and when I decided to make the move into PR they were the first studio I approached. The atmosphere was unique, even as the company grew from the 90 staff when I started to the 220 by the time I left, and that was largely down to the Olivers themselves. They were always positive and passionate about making games and, more importantly, empowering others to do the same.

NATALIE GRIFFITH, PRESS SPACE PR



[Spectrum] The Oliver's most famous creation: *Dizzy*.



Cavey was a prehistoric title from the twins that arrived in 1986.



■ A typical design meeting at Blitz HQ – this time to discuss the movie license *Reservoir Dogs*.

DEVELOPER COMMENTS

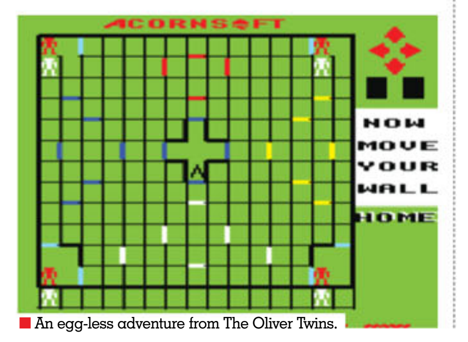
"The best thing [about The Oliver Twins] is that they haven't lost that enthusiasm, that passion for making the most fun games in the most nurturing environment possible. At times it can feel a bit like herding cats as they throw idea after idea at you or tangent a discussion off in an unexpected direction to explore new possibilities but it's that energy that drives everything they do. I think it's amazing that despite the almost continual procession of problems the industry threw at their company over the years I've been with them, they somehow managed to keep this unerringly positive attitude. The Olivers have never been cut-throat businessmen, it's just not their style. They are decent and honest human beings who try to make a profitable business in the turbulent industry they love, and this caring attitude extends to everyone they employ."

JOHN WHIGHAM, FORMER BLITZ CODER

pom creature with a note saying 'Here's one of the last bugs we removed' attached to it. When we got the call saying we'd won, they said they'd like us to appear on TV and that they'd pay for us and our parents to stay in a posh hotel near the studio. We met Jeremy Beadle, Tommy Boyd and Isla St. Clair, and even Gary Numan, who we'd never heard of!

At this stage, was it considered you could make a career from videogames?

Definitely not by our parents or teachers! But they thought we'd learn some valuable skills along the way, so they let us do it. We knew it was the future and would overtake film, TV and the music industry, since all those mediums are linear and fixed whereas videogames had no limits and would improve as technology improved. I remember we said to one journalist who interviewed us for *Super Robin Hood* in 1986 that in the future, videogames will look like movies. Imagine a James Bond movie where you are Bond and it looks and sounds as good as the film – except you are in control. He laughed and left, and ten years later you had *Goldeneye*.



■ An egg-less adventure from The Oliver Twins.

Despite your success, in 1984 you were still coding in basic?

Machine code was a black art. There was no internet to look it up and no books in the local library. Thankfully our computer studies teacher offered to convert a fill routine we'd written in Basic on the BBC, and by typing this in and debugging it, we learned a lot. When we witnessed the increase in speed, we bought the BBC Advanced User Guide which focused a lot more on assembler and machine code. We desperately wanted to move sprites around the screen quickly in our games and knew this was the root of everything.

We imagine you'd soon coded an assembler-written game?

Yes, it was called *Cavey* and we wrote it in the summer of 1986. It was inspired by *Galaxians* and the cartoon *Captain Caveman*. We wrote it in Basic with machine code sprites from our sprite editor (PANDA – P for Philip AND A for Andrew) and then converted the Basic in sections until the whole game was running nice and fast in machine code. It was published by Interceptor, but after this we decided to move to the Amstrad CPC as there was less competition.

But you soon moved away from Interceptor?

We were grateful at first that they published our games, but we weren't happy with the money, which was a standard £200 per game. We were their 'star programmers' but they refused to up our payments. When we went to ECTS in 1986, we visited all the publishers who were there such as Mastertronic, Firebird, Ocean and Gremlin, and showed them our previous games and our new idea. There was one new publisher with a very small stand, not much more than a table with some posters. It was Richard and David Darling and their father Jim, and the company was, of course, Codemasters. We showed them our game idea, *Super Robin Hood* and they said: "We'll pay you £10,000 for it" and our jaws dropped. After writing the game they were very keen but the contract was for royalties: 10p per game. When we questioned it they said: "The first print run will be 20,000 and we have to sell those. But actually we'll sell over 100,000 copies." We were happy with just £2,000, so we signed and it rapidly got to number one and sold a lot of copies!

Of course, your most famous creation for Codemasters was that ovular hero, *Dizzy*. How did it come about?

We loved cartoons and would stop coding for about an hour each day at 4pm when kids cartoons such as *Danger Mouse* and *Thundercats* came on, so we said let's create a character of our own. Messing around, we thought that if we had a large head we could add clearly visible expressions. When we drew it we soon realised we'd never be able to put a body on it as well so added arms and legs directly to the head. We had the idea of making him bob up and down so you could easily see him on the screen and the land of adventure was inspired by the cartoons we watched and *The Hobbit*.



■ [PlayStation] The fun, if flawed, *Firo & Klawd*.

What did you think of Codemasters' promotional skills?
[Laughs] Don't knock the 'Absolutely Brilliant!' slogan – we came up with that one! It was a saying we had at the time and the Darlings loved it. Before we knew it, it was their own slogan, which we were pleased with as we think it did seriously increase sales.

How was the fame and fortune beginning to affect your lives?
We had received £2000 from *Firebird* in 1984 and having just turned 17 and still at sixth form, we bought a car along with some necessary equipment, so that was soon gone. Following the deal with Codemasters for *Super Robin Hood*, we remember taking the cheque into our local Nationwide for over £10,000, and the cashier was a girl we'd been at school with. That said, we still had the confidence of typical geeks when it came to girls. By 1987, the royalties were flowing thick and fast. We bought a nice new sporty car and the following year, a four-bedroom house in Trowbridge. This enabled us to work stupid hours. But we were spending a lot of time with Codemasters so bought a flat in Leamington Spa and this had an adverse effect on productivity – but lead to us starting the business.

Having finished sixth form, you took the brave decision to start your own company. How did that sit with your family?
Our parents could see how dedicated and self-believing we were and our Dad said 'take a year out and see if you can earn more than me'. We made over £100,000 between the two of us that year so we're fairly sure we cleared that hurdle!

Eventually you split from Codemasters. What happened?
They started giving advances to others but not to us because they said we had enough money. It was an understandable argument but actually we did need it because we'd started our own company and had wages and overheads to support. But we have many fond memories of the time. We produced so many games that sold amazingly well and have charts from the day when five of the top ten sellers are our games. Then by 1990 we felt that we had to change formats as the market had changed.

This was presumably the basis of Interactive Studios, which you formed in 1990?
For the first year it was just the two of us and it was actually called Dizzy Enterprises Ltd. But we soon realised that in the future, games would need to be written by teams, so they could be brought to the market quicker. We set up offices and began employing artists and programmers directly. In 1992 we officially became Interactive Studios before becoming Blitz in 1999.

WE KNEW [VIDEOGAMES] WERE THE FUTURE AND WOULD OVERTAKE FILM, TV AND THE MUSIC INDUSTRY

What were your first games?
We needed income quickly so we took on a lot of conversion work while coming up with original designs. Fortunately an agent named Jacqui Lyons set us up with Data East and *Creature Shock*, which saved us from going bust.

What was it like doing 'mere' conversions?
It paid the bills and that's what we needed. It did lead us down the long road of 'work for hire games' which at times was great and we produced some games we were very proud of.



[Amstrad] *Fruit Machine Simulator* was a very popular title for Codemasters.



Andrew and Philip pose proudly with an Employer of Choice Award in 2006.

How well did your business take off – did you find it taking off particularly slowly or did it have a rapid growth?
From 1995 to 2000 we grew our business to 100 people, then to over 200 by 2010. We produced many games to be proud of using other people's brands. We firmly believed we developed what the market wanted and licensed games was a massive market and something Blitz became respected experts at. It gave stability of employment and the games were mostly published. But we also developed our own IP such as *Firo & Klawd*, *Glover*, *Fuzion Frenzy* and *Paper Titans*.

***Firo & Klawd* wasn't the best seller you'd hoped for – what happened?**
We'd seen the specs of the PlayStation and it sounded awesome, so we designed a game specifically for it. The first concepts were for it to be full 3D, but sadly we were talked out of it as it was assumed players wouldn't grasp the controls in a 3D environment. We still had a unique isometric pre-rendered sprite game but it was not successful for a number of reasons. One big problem was that we had cartoon characters with guns and this was a big no-no. Cartoon characters are for kids, but games with guns are 12+ from a ratings point of view.

Which era do you look back at most fondly?
The late Eighties in our house in Trowbridge was a massively productive time. No school, lots of money and nothing but games. Some might have decided to party, but we just worked stupid hours – and loved it! For several years we were releasing a game a month and all of them became best-sellers for the Spectrum and Amstrad. As we moved into the Nineties we started running a business rather than writing games – and we're immensely proud of that but it was not as much fun. It needed to happen.

Is there anything you'd do differently?
Generally we wouldn't change anything. We've loved almost every minute but while we are proud of what we've achieved, we don't live in the past. We have very exciting plans and live in the knowledge that the best is yet to come!

THE RETRO GUIDE TO…

TEENAGE MUTANT NINJA TURTLES

The notorious sewer-dwelling crime fighters have been a videogame mainstay for decades. **games™** takes a look back at the courageous adventures of everyone's favourite heroes in a half shell, now celebrating the 25th anniversary of their virtual debut









THERE ISN'T AN Eighties-born child that wasn't aware of the pop culture whirlwind that was Teenage Mutant Ninja Turtles. Introduced in comic books in 1984, Leonardo, Michelangelo, Donatello and Raphael would later star in a series of successful movies, a popular animated television show and a litany of videogame adaptations that helped satiate the appetite of the avid Turtlemaniacs. It was publisher Konami that established the adolescent anthropomorphic turtles as a gaming force to be reckoned with some 25 years ago, setting the template for some of the most entertaining side-scrolling beat-'em-ups of the era. But it wasn't always easy being green, with the bandana-clad vigilantes failing to evolve alongside the medium. Nevertheless, with a potent combination of nostalgia and an inimitable ability for resurrection, we take a look back at the enduring videogame legacy of those pizza-loving crime fighters. Cowabunga.





TEENAGE MUTANT NINJA TURTLES 1989

SYSTEM: NES

Konami won the rights to Teenage Mutant Ninja Turtles after multiple publishers aggressively vied for the licence during the Eighties, and it subsequently delivered one of the all-time best-selling titles on the NES. And it's easy to see why, with all four turtles battling across myriad colourful environments, featuring a deluge of weaponry to utilise against a horde of familiar enemies. It was influenced in no small part by *Zelda II: The Adventure Of Link*, with the gameplay split between an overhead view of the navigable world map and a side-scrolling perspective once a turtle enters a building. In later years it became as reviled as it was revered, due to its frustrating design shortcomings. Often stages demanded impossible gaps to be traversed that, if missed, dropped players back at the start of a room, respawning enemies for their troubles. Later levels let you rescue previously fallen turtles, but not many players back then could claim to have survived far past the second mission (especially with the lack of save function).

TEENAGE MUTANT NINJA TURTLES 1989

SYSTEM: HANDHELD

Konami released several handheld games based on Teenage Mutant Ninja Turtles in a broad stroke of marketing to compensate for the relative infancy of the home videogame market. The gameplay was unique enough that Konami filed a patent, and while the few modes, basic animations and crude combat haven't aged well, it remains another inspired artefact of the Turtles' media supremacy. It was released a few years later in Europe under the family-friendly 'Hero Turtles' branding.





TEENAGE MUTANT NINJA TURTLES: THE ARCADE GAME 1989

SYSTEM: ARCADE

The original arcade Turtles release not only set the template for the franchise on multiple formats but also influenced several four-player coin-ops that would later dominate arcades. The four-player co-operative play alone made the side-scrolling beat-'em-up an alluring prospect and the use of the animated series' visual style, humour and enemies solidified its appeal. One of the more impressive features is the distinct mechanics of each character: Donatello is slow but powerful, Michelangelo and Raphael possess faster attacks but at a shorter range, while Leonardo is a general all-rounder. Matched with interactive environments and engaging cut-scenes, it's one of the best arcade titles of its time. It was later ported to home consoles, most notably to NES where it received two extra stages and mixed around some of the later boss battles to include bespoke villains. While considerable effort was taken to make the port a worthwhile home console release, the significantly reduced graphics and lack of four-player multiplayer meant it paled in comparison to the coin-op. Nevertheless, Konami understood the match-up of simplistic 2D brawling and the Turtles licence was a lucrative one and the formula has rarely been altered since.

TEENAGE MUTANT NINJA TURTLES II: SPLINTER SPEAKS 1990

SYSTEM: HANDHELD

While more-or-less featuring the same gameplay as the previous handheld, the second LCD game had a novel feature wherein Turtles (and possibly Splinter!) would shout encouragement through the speaker.





TEENAGE MUTANT NINJA TURTLES: FALL OF THE FOOT CLAN 1990

SYSTEM: GAME BOY

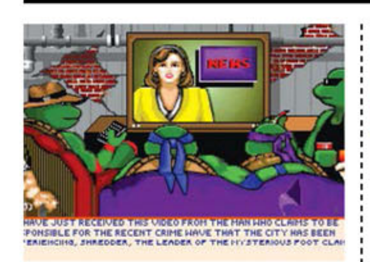
The first Game Boy Turtles title is a slimmed-down version of the previous side-scrolling beat-'em-ups. Once again Shredder and Krang have kidnapped April O'Neil and the reptilian heroes have to battle through five stages to thwart their evil schemes. There's a lack of fun, but plenty of pizza.



TEENAGE MUTANT NINJA TURTLES: WORLD TOUR 1990

SYSTEM: AMIGA, AMSTEAD, ATARI ST, COMMODORE 64, DOS, ZX SPECTRUM

Part of a series of computer colouring books created by defunct developer Brian A. Rice, Inc. (it also produced similar Electronic Crayon titles featuring Mario and Sesame Street), this Turtles-themed instalment features 30 pictures of famous landmarks to colour in, including the Kremlin, Taj Mahal and the Alps.



TEENAGE MUTANT NINJA TURTLES: MANHATTAN MISSIONS 1991

SYSTEM: DOS

Konami got a bit lost tonally with this straight-up 2D brawler. Lifting several elements from the original Mirage comic book series, but including several notable additions made by the animated television show, the result is a grim rendition of the usual Turtles adventure. *Manhattan Missions* is also notable for being the first videogame to feature an appearance from fan-favourite Casey Jones.



TEENAGE MUTANT NINJA TURTLES III: THE MANHATTAN PROJECT 1991

SYSTEM: NES

The third Turtles game to appear on the NES, *The Manhattan Project* utilises the same basic mechanics as its arcade-originating predecessor. A few twists make the gameplay more compelling, most notably the Turtles' individual special moves and an alternative game mode that enables players to fight one another, both of which contributed to a far superior sequel in every regard. Sadly, it was never released in Europe.

"THE FIRST GAME TO FEATURE THE NOTORIOUS PIZZA MONSTER"



TEENAGE MUTANT NINJA TURTLES II: BACK FROM THE SEWERS 1991

SYSTEM: GAME BOY

Konami was more ambitious with its second Turtles Game Boy release, adding more open environments, harder enemies and exciting set-pieces. This was also the first game to feature the notorious Pizza Monster.

TEENAGE MUTANT NINJA TURTLES III: SHREDDER'S LAST STAND 1991

SYSTEM: HANDHELD

Another LCD game in the popular line of handheld electronic games, this time released by Tiger Electronics. Rather hilariously the game doesn't actually feature Shredder.



TEENAGE MUTANT NINJA TURTLES: TURTLES IN TIME 1991

SYSTEM: ARCADE, SNES

The follow-up to the original arcade title remains the most revered entry in the Turtles' videogame saga. Praised for its wider range of gameplay mechanics, hugely dynamic levels and enhanced visuals and sound – the latter mostly consisting of original music, although it did feature 'Pizza Power', which was taken from a TMNT live concert. The SNES port was equally as celebrated for encapsulating the essence of the television show. It added new bosses (seemingly it was unheard of to release a home console Turtles game without the inclusion of Bebop and Rocksteady) and exclusive stages to the new Nintendo iteration, alongside additional game modes. *Turtles In Time* doesn't just mark the apex of the brand's videogame legacy, but can be identified as one of the most influential and defining titles within its genre.



DEDICATED CONSOLES

The Teenage Mutant Ninja Turtles didn't just appear on various consoles over the years, but starred on their own dedicated systems

THE WAY OF THE WARRIOR

Functioning in a similar way to PlayStation EyeToy games, The Way Of The Warrior was a Turtles system featuring a camera that tracked player movements in the game. Featuring five modes, each is just a variation on punching things as quickly as possible.

BATTLE FOR THE CITY

Featuring four levels of basic side-scrolling brawling, the software featured on this console was developed by Wayforward Technologies. Battle For The City is the only one of the three consoles that provides a gaming experience that can be considered worthwhile.

MUTANT AND MONSTER MAYHEM LASER BLASTER

A big plastic light gun game, Mutant And Monster Mayhem is lacking in substance and longevity. All-in-all it's by far one of the most tenuous pieces of interactive Turtles merchandise ever produced.



TEENAGE MUTANT NINJA TURTLES: BASKETBALL 1991

SYSTEM: HANDHELD

Everyone knows that the Teenage Mutant Ninja Turtles love nothing more than relaxing by playing a bit of basketball. Oh, wait, nobody knows that, except for maybe three people who bought this odd Turtles-starring sport handheld.





TEENAGE MUTANT NINJA TURTLES: THE HYPERSTONE HEIST 1992

SYSTEM: MEGA DRIVE

After enjoying a few years as predominantly one of Nintendo's premiere third-party exclusives, the Turtle clan made their way over to Sega with *The Hyperstone Heist*. Essentially a retooled version of *Turtles In Time*, it emulates major sections of the arcade/SNES title with a twist – the opening sees the Statue Of Liberty disappearing again, this time mysteriously vanishing into thin air; levels are often an amalgamation of several *Turtles In Time* stages at once. The Hyperstone Heist has fewer than half the levels of *Turtles In Time*, but counterbalances that with much longer stages, more aggressive enemies and faster-moving characters. Ultimately, there's enough to differentiate the two titles that allows the Mega Drive debut of TMNT to stand on its own merits and lest we forget that the US release features the best Turtles box art of all time.

TEENAGE MUTANT HERO TURTLES: FOUR FOR FOUR 1992

SYSTEM: HANDHELD

A more stylish handheld unit than its predecessors (it looks like an octagon), *Four For Four* is another basic brawler aimed at European territories (once again using the 'Hero' title) but it unfortunately does little to evolve the format.

TEENAGE MUTANT NINJA TURTLES III: RADICAL RESCUE 1993

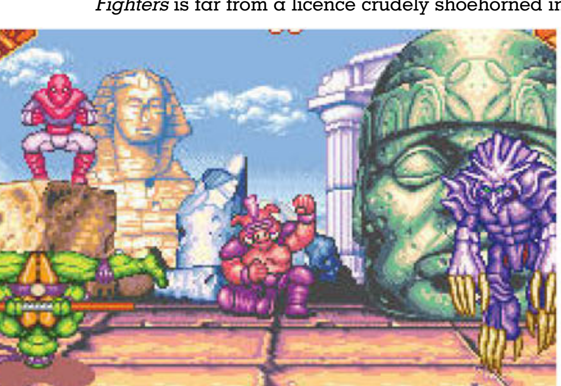
SYSTEM: GAME BOY

One of the more divergent titles, *Radical Rescue* is a Metroidvania-style platformer, where each turtle has their own unique ability crucial to completing the game. Players begin as Michelangelo, who has to rescue the other Turtles, Splinter and April.

TEENAGE MUTANT NINJA TURTLES: TOURNAMENT FIGHTERS 1993

SYSTEM: SNES, MEGA DRIVE, NES

Konami decided to do the vogue thing and copy-and-paste the *Street Fighter II* formula for its next TMNT title. *Tournament Fighters* received drastically different iterations across multiple platforms, with the SNES version being the strongest of the three. Despite the fact that it was released as the licence was losing its lustre with young gamers, it does hold a couple of notable accolades: it was the last game Konami released on the NES and the SNES version was one of the first fighting games to feature a super bar – an innovation that was ignored due to its commercial failure. Much better than gamers remember, *Tournament Fighters* is far from a licence crudely shoehorned into a genre template. While it might not match the technical showcase of its contemporaries during the genre's boom, it's an accomplished and immensely playable fighter that remains an underrated gem.



TEENAGE MUTANT NINJA TURTLES: DIMENSION X ASSAULT 1995

SYSTEM: HANDHELD

Another standalone handheld title that bridged the gap between Konami's first and second phase of Turtles games. The visuals were more inspired than handheld units released in previous years, but the gameplay itself felt antiquated by this point.

NINJA TURTLES: THE NEXT MUTATION 1997

SYSTEM: HANDHELD

The ill-fated live-action television series received its own handheld game: *The Next Mutation*. It's once again rote nonsense, but it does have the distinction of being the only Teenage Mutant Ninja Turtles licenced game to feature the fifth turtle, Venus de Milo.





TEENAGE MUTANT NINJA TURTLES 2003

SYSTEM: GAME BOY ADVANCE

2003 saw Konami return to Teenage Mutant Ninja Turtles after a new television series brought them back into the public consciousness. It's an exclusive for the Game Boy Advance and surprisingly good fun, featuring a unique set of levels for each turtle, which vary between traditional side-scrolling stages, third-person races and shooting sections. Definitely playing to the strengths of its predecessors, it was a strong return for the Ninja Turtles.




TEENAGE MUTANT NINJA TURTLES 2003

SYSTEM: GAMECUBE, XBOX, PS2, PC

The first major console release in a decade, it was a disappointment by most fans' standards. It was nothing but a simple button-masher, lacking the depth and inspired design that defined its previous videogame incarnations. The only positives are the audio and visuals, which perfectly replicated the tone of the then-airing animated series.

TEENAGE MUTANT NINJA TURTLES 2: BATTLE NEXUS 2004

SYSTEM: GAMECUBE, GBA, XBOX,PS2, PC

While the addition of four-player co-op made it an improvement on the last instalment, the poor controls, feeble AI and lack of variety makes it a hollow experience from beginning to end. The only saving grace is the inclusion of the original arcade game as a bonus – a reminder of how it should be done.



TEENAGE MUTANT NINJA TURTLES 3: MUTANT NIGHTMARE 2005

SYSTEM: GAMECUBE, NINTENDO DS, XBOX, PS2

One thing that can be said about Konami's take on the 2003 show is that it adheres closely to the revised canon. *Mutant Nightmare* is still plagued by the same technical issues and repetitive gameplay that hampered its two predecessors, but the focus on set-pieces makes it a slightly more engaging experience.





TEENAGE MUTANT NINJA TURTLES FAST FORWARD: NINJA TRAINING NYC 2005

SYSTEM: MOBILE

The first mobile game based on TMNT, it's hardly a gracious debut for the fearsome foursome in what is the most monotonous platformer the clan has ever appeared in.





TEENAGE MUTANT NINJA TURTLES: MUTANT MELEE 2005

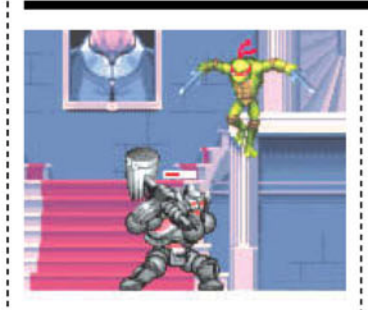
SYSTEM: GAMECUBE, PS2,XBOX, PC

A novel spin-off that enables multiple TMNT characters to compete across four different game modes. It's largely forgettable due to the repetitive gameplay and the minuscule battlegrounds.

TMNT: PLUG 'N PLAY 2006

SYSTEM: PLUG 'N PLAY

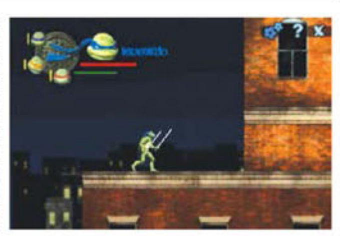
There were three Plug 'n Play titles (controllers with pre-installed games that can be connected to televisions) that were released in 2006, all three of which were unimaginative brawlers. However, squint a little and it looked like you were playing a really tiny version of a Nineties cartoon.



TMNT: THE POWER OF 4 2007

SYSTEM: MOBILE

A tie-in to the movie released in the same year, this basic side-scroller featured some impressive animations and enough gameplay variety to make it an adequate mobile time-waster.



TMNT: NINJA ADVENTURES – MINI-GAME AND ACTIVITY CENTRE 2007

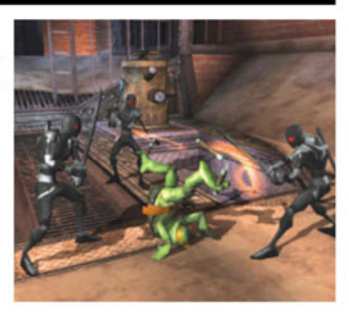
SYSTEM: PC

A platformer with screensavers and wallpapers. This kids' bundle is the videogame equivalent of a crumpled party bag with a half-eaten slice of cake inside.

TMNT 2007

SYSTEM: MULTI

Ubisoft seized the rights to TMNT, releasing its first major console release to coincide with the decent animated movie. Given the all-encompassing multi-platform release, the quality varies massively from console to console. The home console iterations are dull; the GBA version is the most enjoyable.



THE FLASH GAMES

The Turtles take on the internet in this series of Flash games

Teenage Mutant Ninja Turtles: Double Damage

Created to promote Ubisoft's fighter *TMNT: Smash-Up*, this is a basic beat-'em-up in the same vein as the original arcade games.

Teenage Mutant Ninja Turtles: Dark Horizon

The first game to be based on the Nickelodeon versions of the characters; it's an entertaining but slight take on the classic brawler formula.

Teenage Mutant Ninja Turtles: Sewer Run

Involving the Ninja Turtles traversing platforms, the added racing and combat elements make this an enjoyable, fast-paced browser entry.

Teenage Mutant Ninja Turtles: Throw Back!

This title is a variation on the Shredder boss battle features in the SNES *Turtles In Time*. Avoid Shredder's gunfire while taking out foot soldier goons.



Teenage Mutant Ninja Turtles: Ninja Turtle Tactics 3D

A variation on the classic horde mode, this ambitious Flash title tasks the player with fending off waves of enemies that take the form of the other Turtles.

Teenage Mutant Ninja Turtles: Donnie Saves A Princess

Donatello's dreaming he's having to battle through several classic games. *Mario*, *Zelda* and the original arcade title all feature in this creative curiosity.





TEENAGE MUTANT NINJA TURTLES: THE NINJA TRIBUNAL 2009

SYSTEM: MOBILE

The Ninja Tribunal takes TMNT and gives it an RPG spin with great results. Influenced by *Final Fantasy* and *Chrono Trigger* it's a captivating concept, albeit limited by its mobile platform.



TMNT: THE SHREDDER REBORN 2009

SYSTEM: MOBILE

A direct sequel to *The Ninja Tribunal, The Shredder Reborn* focuses less on action and concentrates on story and exploration elements. Once again it's rough around the edges and hindered by its choice of platform.



TEENAGE MUTANT NINJA TURTLES: TURTLES IN TIME RE-SHELLED 2009

SYSTEM: XBOX LIVE, PSN

Having failed to bring the Turtles back to gamers in any meaningful (read: financially successful) way, Ubisoft opted to give an HD touch-up to the most beloved entry in the franchise. Inevitably, it couldn't quite live up to the original game it was based on. The lack of drop-in/drop-out multiplayer was a sore point with fans and the overall art direction lacked the slickness of the Nineties version. Nevertheless, the core gameplay remained mostly unchanged (although animations were given a little extra whizz-bang). It's a testament to the timeless original that even with a few poor design decisions *Re-Shelled* is as enthralling as ever.



TEENAGE MUTANT NINJA TURTLES: ARCADE ATTACK 2009

SYSTEM: NINTENDO DS

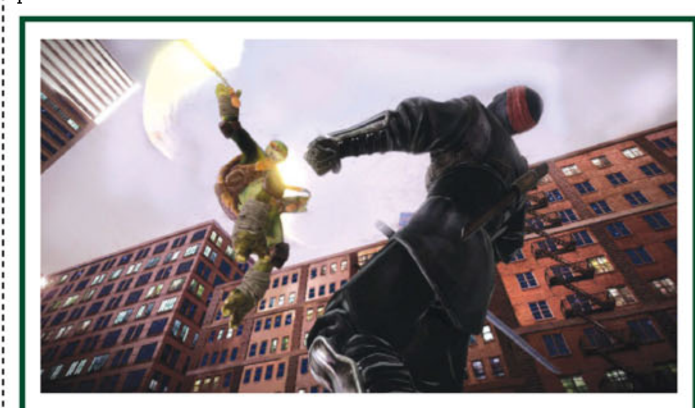
The Nintendo DS got its own Turtles-flavoured beat-'em-up in 2009. It takes in aspects of the original Mirage comics, as well as the most recent animated adventures into consideration in this mediocre handheld title.



TEENAGE MUTANT NINJA TURTLES: ROOFTOP RUN 2013

SYSTEM: MOBILE

A decent endless runner and the first Ninja Turtles game to debut on iOS. It's perhaps the best contemporary adaptation of TMNT in quite some time, ably replicating the look and animation style of the animated series of the time. There's a lot to like here, even if it does lack a bit of the necessary mechanical polish to make it anything but a passable distraction.



TEENAGE MUTANT NINJA TURTLES: OUT OF THE SHADOWS 2013

SYSTEM: XBLA, PSN, PC

The first TMNT published by Activision, the most commendable achievement of *Out Of The Shadows* is its attempt to bring back the spirit of the arcade original. However, marred by myriad technical glitches, this sloppy, rushed game was rightfully panned on its release earlier in the year.





TEENAGE MUTANT NINJA TURTLES 2013

SYSTEM: XBOX 360, WII, 3DS

The latest TMNT title is once again published by Activision and proves to be another commercial misfire. Even the slavish dedication to its source material and high-profile voice cast can't save the Xbox 360 version from the usual woes of repetitive combat and uninspired mission design. The 3DS iteration fares slightly better; however, the truncated campaign length and lack of meaningful challenge make it mediocre at best. Suffice to say that the Turtles' halcyon days are long since past.

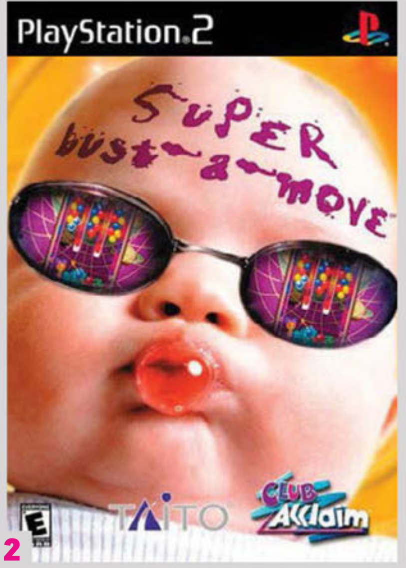
ESSENTIALS

10 MOST MISLEADING EXAMPLES OF BOX ART

It's hard to represent what a game is through one static image. Box art for games is traditionally more symbolic than representative, but most publishers and developers still aim to at least communicate an idea of what the game is about, or what its main features are. Sometimes, though, the box art is wildly off the mark. We found the ten worst examples for your consideration.



1



2



3

4



5

Phantasy Star II
Developer: Sega

1 The US and PAL releases of *Phantasy Star II* shipped with box art that suggested a *Dune*-like fantasy realm, brimming with alien races, weird machines and computerised brains. While the game *did* feature all of these things, they were included in a purely top-down overworld, switching to third-person for battles. The Eighties heavy-metal album artwork on the box was nothing like the brightly coloured pixel art in the main game. Through narrative and tone, *Phantasy Star II* established itself as the *Dune* of gaming, but anyone who picked the cartridge up expecting a world as visually fleshed out as it was on the box, was in for a sad surprise.

Super Bust-A-Move
Developer: Taito

2 *Super Bust-A-Move* (or *Super Puzzle Bobble*) is your standard match-three bubble-popping arcade game whose art direction was limited to say the least. The entire game was confined to small boxes in which you shot bubbles at other bubbles – that was as deep as it went. For some reason, the American and European releases featured a quite terrifying baby's face on the cover, with levels from the game reflected in its glasses. Why? We have absolutely no idea, but there are no babies in the game, and we would be fairly cautious about sucking on one of the game's bubbles like that kid is – it's clearly a choking hazard. Irresponsible parents.

Far Cry 3
Developer: Ubisoft Montreal

3 This box art feels like a throwback to the Nineties era of interesting but completely irrelevant covers for games. *Far Cry 3*'s box sees the main villain sitting there looking at you – *right at you* – with your protagonist's head buried in the sand. Is this a sly reference to the ignorance your main character shows being the unreliable narrator that he is? Is it a commentary on modern games protagonists? Did it just look good? Who knows. What we do know is that this scene isn't in the game, and doesn't really tell you too much about anything *Far Cry 3* has to offer. Our selection would have been a guy punching a shark.

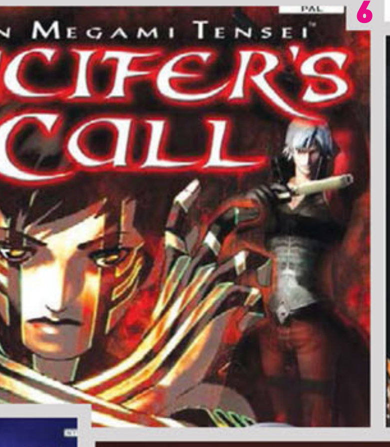
Ultimate Duck Hunting
Developer: Mid Carolina Media

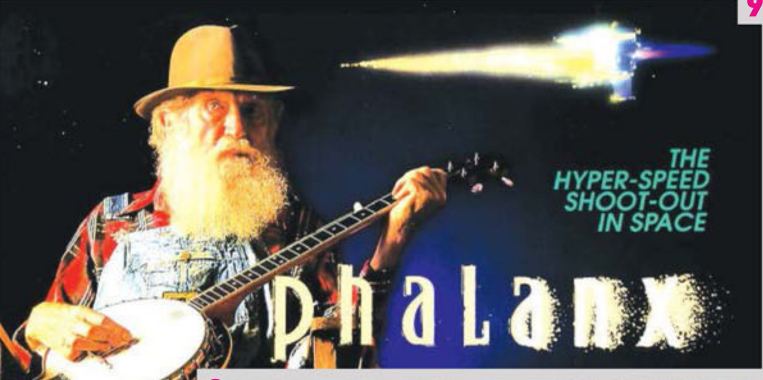
4 There's a duck and a man in camouflage with a gun, yes, but by far the most notable thing about *Ultimate Duck Hunting*'s artwork is the giant Labrador's face that takes up two-thirds of the box. It's terrifying, and it's looking right into your eyes like it can see your soul. It feels like it's judging you for going out and hunting ducks. There are dogs in the game, but while this Labrador looks intelligent and, well, real, all the dogs in *Ultimate Duck Hunting* are complete and utter idiots that can't even locate a duck that you've shot out of the air. The whole game is an embarrassment, and that's just galvanised by the weird box art.

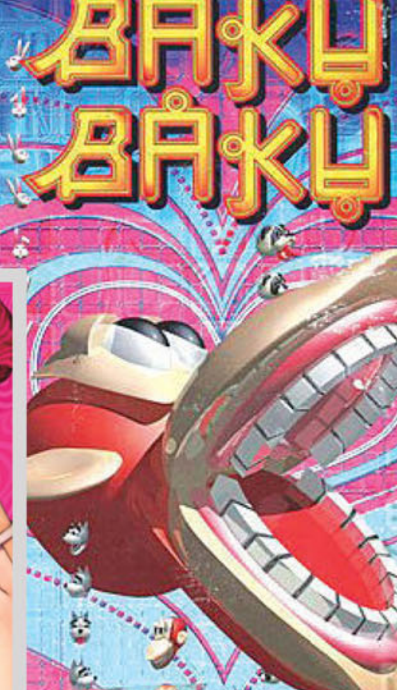
Pure Pinball
Developer: Iridion Interactive

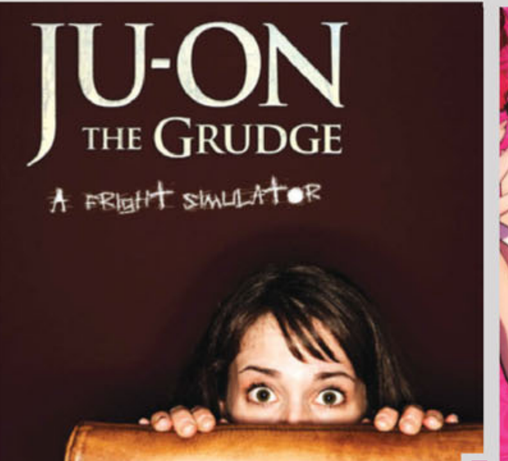
5 Pinball, traditionally, is a game played on a sealed table where you ping a number of balls at targets and attempt to stop it falling into the gutter with flippers. It is not – typically, at least – a game where you stand amid a sea of scantily-clad women carrying weaponry. *Pure Pinball* is a brash and unashamed attempt at using sex/misogyny to sell. Obviously just putting a pinball machine on the front cover wouldn't have grabbed that much attention, so filling the art with a couple of pin-up stereotypes would, surely? Well, it turns out it didn't – the title sold disastrously. But that could also be because it was an unforgivably bad game, too…

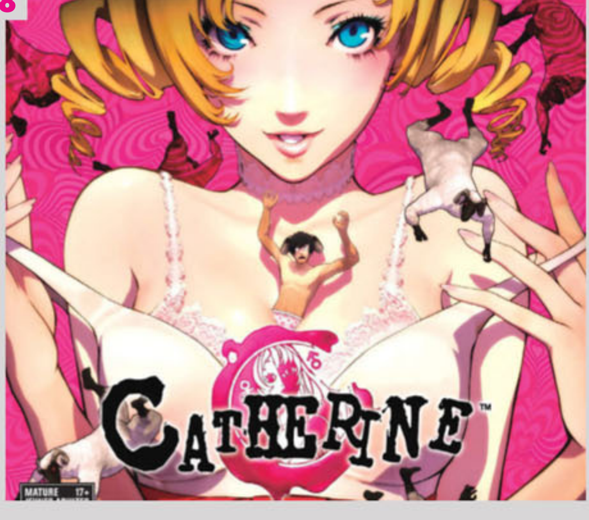












Shin Megami Tensei: Lucifer's Call
Developer: Atlus

6 Released as *Shin Megami Tensei: Nocturne* in North America, Atlus's first PS2 effort was a great JRPG that explored international mythology and Tokyo forming the centre of a new world. The updated release saw the inclusion of Dante, whose role in the game was effectively a cameo – he turns up, threatens to kill you, then you can recruit him later on. It's a nice inclusion, but not anything essential, and certainly not something worth selling the title on. It worked, though. Many people picked up the game *because* of Dante and that laid the foundations for *Persona* and *Digital Devil Saga* to become popular franchises.

Ju-On: The Grudge
Developer: Rising Star Games

7 Presumably based on the film that goes by the same name, *The Grudge* might not have had the licence to use the symbolic grey-skinned girl from the movie. As a result, Rising Star Games may have just grabbed a girl from the office and thrown her behind a sofa to snap a picture of someone looking scared. This box art certainly isn't indicative of gameplay; the entire premise of the game isn't built around you squatting behind a chair, peeking out every now and then to get startled. 'A fright simulator', claims the strapline. Indeed – true terror comes from kneeling behind a chair with a Wii Remote clutched in your hands.

Catherine
Developer: Atlus

8 At first glance, you might think this game was about being a tiny man in his underwear being chased by a giant woman in a negligée. That's only half true. Poor Vincent is shown sandwiched in between Catherine's breasts, looking utterly dismayed, as sheep fall down around him. If you didn't know the game was an arcade-puzzler at heart, you might think that *Catherine* was an advert for a Saga-inspired Dali-esque theatre production, perhaps produced by drama students from your local arts college. The art certainly sets the risqué tone of the game, but does so without any inclination as to what the game actually is.

Phalanx
Developer: ZOOM Inc.

9 Originally published in 1991, *Phalanx* was amongst a plethora of space-shooters that were saturating the market. Many games within the genre launched and flopped because they had no visibility. The makers of *Phalanx* openly admitted that they went with a completely irrelevant direction on the box, just so they could make people look at their game. Fair play, we feel – it certainly got our attention. Who wouldn't want to play a game about an old guy playing a banjo singing songs about spaceships flying overhead? In fact, why hasn't that game been made yet? Sounds like a perfect Kickstarter project.

Baku Baku
Developer: Sega

10 Quite frankly one of the oddest games we have seen released on the Sega Saturn (and that's saying something), Sega's *Baku Baku* was a match-three puzzler that revolved around pairing up different animals' favourite foods with the critter in question in the hope of unloading the trash food onto your opponent's screen. *Baku Baku*'s box art, though, would have you thinking that this game was just a prolonged LSD trip taking place in a Tokyo zoo; dreary-eyed pandas and over-alert mice (among many other animals) spinning around as neon love hearts pulse and shimmer in front of you. The art's almost as crazy as the game itself.

THE








EARFORCE PX4

MANUFACTURER: **Turtle Beach** PRICE: **£94.42**

CURRENTLY THE ONLY headset compatible with the PS4, Turtle Beach's PX4 model ships with a wireless transmitter that detects empty frequencies to transmit its signal through – meaning your Wi-Fi won't be interrupted and your game sounds will never cut out. We had some hands-on time with the headset while playing *Battlefield 4*, and despite the on-ear interface being a little fiddly, everything you need on a headset is accessible and responsive (once you learn where all the buttons are). The volume wheel and mic level controls are fairly small, and don't offer the precision volume tuning of some of the other headsets on the market, but this is countered by the Blast Limiter; if you turn up the volume when stalking through a stealth level, the Blast Limiter will cap how loud explosions or gunfire will come through, meaning you don't have to fumble with controls to make sure a Michael Bay-esque blast won't deafen you. The headset, unlike a lot of others available, also comes with four built-in EQ settings – flat, bass boost, treble boost and dual boost. This allows for some nice versatility in the headset; it's effective for gaming, music and video playback. Bluetooth compatibility allows the PX4 to pair with your mobile so you can make/receive calls during gameplay. At one point, we received a call during a game of Conquest, answered it by pressing the Bluetooth button on the headset and then carried on playing with no interruptions.





PLAYSTATION VITA TV

MANUFACTURER: **Sony** PRICE: **¥9,480 (Japan)**

RELEASED AT THE end of last year in Japan, Sony's curious PlayStation Vita TV is a modest little box that has the power to play the majority of PS Vita games through a television using the DualShock 3 pad. Boasting not just Vita's own collection of unique software, but access to a vast digital catalogue of PSOne classics and a range of streaming television services, already the hardware is being likened to that of Ouya – a budget console with a comprehensive list of software and streaming features available straight from the box.

Perhaps its most alluring function is the ability to stream PlayStation 4 titles using a shared local network, enabling players to extend PS4 gaming experience around their home at any time. With Gaikai looming on the horizon, there is a wealth of potential in PS Vita as a streaming device, ultimately outlining the device as a major contender in the console marketplace at a much more palatable price tag.

The unfortunate rub is that Sony has yet to confirm Vita TV outside of Japan. However, given that Sony is still riding the crest of the PlayStation 4 launch, announcing another console will only serve to confuse consumers, with a late 2014 release seeming much more likely. Certainly, with Vita's own robust and delectable range of software and a bevy of features at the cutting edge of the industry, Vita TV is far more than an effort to reignite interest in its struggling handheld system; it's potentially one of the most exciting hardware releases of 2014.

GAMING CLOTHING



FALLOUT REMEMBER THE FALLEN SHIRT

None of us want to forget the experiences we had in *Fallout*; you can remember the hours properly with this commemorative shirt.
http://tinyurl.com/nq8ru3v



SONIC SPEED LEGGINGS

Insert Coin's *Sonic* leggings might not make you run as fast as the blue hedgehog, but they'll certainly go well with a pair of bulky red sneakers.
http://tinyurl.com/km37blk



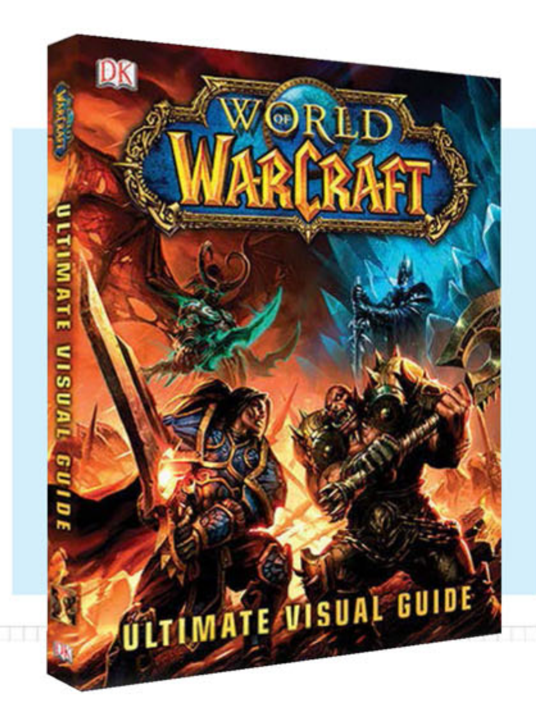
BLOOD SAUSAGE SHIRT

For those that know *Wasteland 2*, this shirt is a witty and thoughtful homage; for those that don't, it's a creepy, threatening warning…
http://tinyurl.com/p6eh6zu

WORLD OF WARCRAFT ULTIMATE VISUAL GUIDE

PUBLISHER: **DORLING KINDERSLEY** PRICE: **£17.99**

AN OFFICIAL COMPANION to the wider *World Of Warcraft*, the visual guide provides an extra insight into the world of Azeroth. Despite some of the double page spreads being a little sparse, the book is loaded with detail and extra embellishment of Blizzard's rich mythos. Our favourite parts of the book are the timelines – they clear up a lot of the lore and history of the individual races. This would make a great Christmas gift for any dedicated *WOW*ers.

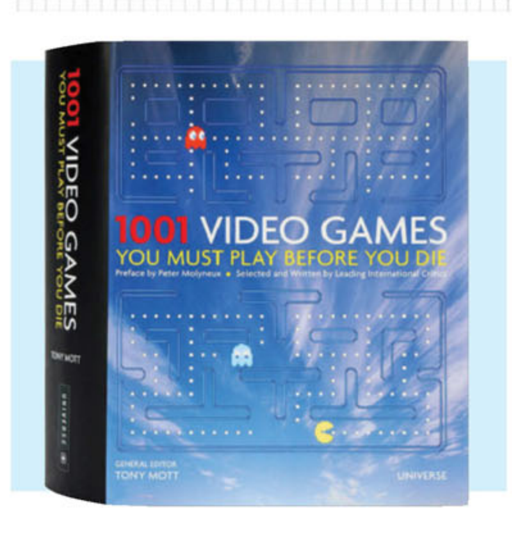


SCUF HYBRID PAD

MANUFACTURER: **SCUFGAMING** PRICE: **FROM £64.99**



FEELING UNDERWHELMED with the new generation of consoles and considering making the shift to PC? Adapting to a keyboard and mouse set-up after spending so many hours with a pad can be difficult, but Scuf's Hybrid controller has a solution; the analogue thumbsticks allow 360-degree control (unlike WASD inputs), and we found them just as comfortable and responsive as the Xbox 360's pad (which was the best gaming pad of the last generation, in our opinion). The trigger-stops seem like a nice addition at first, but soon end up feeling a little superficial.



1001 VIDEO GAMES YOU MUST PLAY BEFORE YOU DIE

PUBLISHER: **CASSELL ILLUSTRATED** PRICE: **£20**

THIS BEHEMOTH OF a book is an essential guide to the gaming landscape – covering all the bases from retro and cult classics to the modern triple-A mega-series. Informative and loaded with bespoke, specific content, *1001 Video Games You Must Play Before You Die* is a great coffee-table filler; we've used it as a conversation starter for all of our awkward, unenthusiastic gatherings. It's certainly worth the investment, and it'll take about 40 years to read it cover to cover.

gamesTM

ONLINE

THE ESSENTIAL GUIDE TO THE ONLINE GAMING UNIVERSE

BEGINNER'S GUIDE TO...

PLANETSIDE 2

games™ hits the frontline of galactic warfare to present your entryway into Sony's epic interstellar shooter

PS4/XBOX ONE ONLINE TESTED

Now that we've had a decent amount of time to get to grips with the online functionality of the next-gen consoles, we've started asking ourselves a serious question – what does this generation bring to online gaming that the Xbox 360 and PS3 couldn't?



Boot up the PS4 and the very first thing you see is a ticker with the question 'What's New?' When we first had a poke around with this feature, we were a little underwhelmed – it just seemed to be a cheap imitation of an RSS-style news feed. When more of our friends started signing in with the PS4, though, we realised what a small but significant innovation this feed is – it's a step towards revolutionising the online gaming space with valid and pertinent information, further blurring the line between social media and gaming.

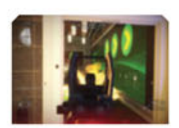
For a lot of people, a games console should be just that – a system that plays your game with minimum fuss. Whatever your standpoint, you can't argue that both the PS4 and Xbox One have streamlined everything and made it just that *bit* easier to connect – even finding a game and matchmaking is significantly faster. The social side of things is an embellishment that we welcome – notifications popping up saying '[your friend] has achieved a new top score!' or '[your friend] has just finished his best game of *Killzone* yet!' at first seem trite, but after you get used to them they offer a consistent insight into how your friends play and how your progress stacks up against theirs.

We really want to see 'What's New?' become more than just a cheap ad space.

The option to keep up with your friends is obscured behind a couple of menus on the Xbox One UI, but it's still there and surprisingly cohesive, too – it communicates everything you need to know about what they've recently been playing, which achievements they've unlocked and how well they're doing on certain games. We're still waiting for publishers to really take advantage of what this new feed system can do, though. By having a direct link to such a tight and attentive audience, developers and publishers can effectively advertise their game to you in a way never seen before. As long as it's done tastefully, it could be a truly groundbreaking way of showing off new games' features and innovations.

The latent connectivity of the consoles also allows for easy sharing. Taking screenshots and sharing your achievements with Twitter and Facebook used to be a needlessly complicated task, featuring capturing devices and software produced by third-party companies. With the PS4, you can broadcast live to Twitch or share via Facebook – take a cursory look at the Twitch app and you'll see people are putting it to good use; there's always something to watch, and hundreds of people watching.

The novelty of playing 32-on-32 player matches on a console still hasn't worn thin. We can expect this scale to inflate as servers grow bigger.



To date, most next-gen upgrades have been purely cosmetic.

"Developers and publishers can effectively advertise their game to you in a way never seen before"

Microsoft has invested heavily in the exclusive rights to *Titanfall*. It hopes it'll secure a large online community.

The potential of the feature is extensive – think you've just beaten a level in a way that hasn't been thought of before? Save it, share it. In seconds, you've created a walkthrough that other players can use.

The actual gameplay has been bumped up on next-gen, too – *Battlefield 4* can now support up to 64 players per match, and the large-scale 32-on-32 battles, running at 60fps, still feels surreal to console players. Those figures no longer reside in the realms of just PC gaming. EA is excelling with its seamless All-Drive system in *Need For Speed: Rivals*, too – we've played both generations' versions, and we noticed a marked difference in the quality of the integrated online aspects. Last generation's All-Drive didn't always seem to match us with players outside of our friends list, whereas the current gen's versions dropped players in and out of the game smoothly and without pause. If this kind of immersive



Despite lacking a lobby system, *Killer Instinct*'s online is smooth and responsive. This is the first fighter we've played in a while that doesn't have horrific lag issues.

Sony's impressive shooter MMO *Planetside 2* is heading to PS4 this year.

matchmaking is what we're able to achieve at launch, the potential of shared-world games further down the line is staggering.

Unfortunately, it's not all good news – with this new generation having been conceived under an always-on mentality, opportunistic developers are keen to take advantage of the potential of micro-transactions. We've already seen the likes of *Ryse*, *Forza 5* and *Killer Instinct* travel this path on the Xbox One, and with *Planetside 2* and *DC Universe* soon to hit the PS4, Sony's little black box isn't safe from the influence of premium content, either. Microsoft has itself admitted that it doesn't yet fully understand how to effectively implement in-game purchases, and promises to keep an eye on how consumers are conducting their spending and respond to that behaviour appropriately.

Overall, the introduction of the next-generation's online elements has been positive – we've been consistently impressed by the ease of matchmaking, the capabilities of the hardware, the rapid download speeds and the social features each console has introduced. Considering this is how the consoles are operating at launch, both Microsoft and Sony should be applauded on their efforts. If the last generation was the first true online console era, then this is the era of inter-connectivity in games. Like it or loathe it, social media integration with your console is here to stay. You may as well make the most of it.

Killzone online is a PS4 highlight.

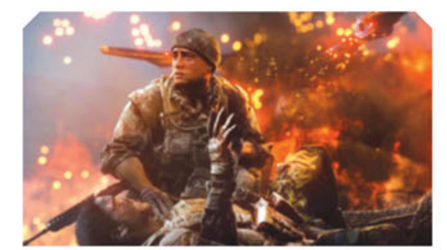
IN OTHER NEWS…

SONY AND MICROSOFT'S UPS AND DOWNS DIDN'T STOP AFTER PLAYSTATION 4 AND XBOX ONE REACHED RETAIL– BOTH COMPANIES HAVE CONTINUED TO MAKE HEADLINES IN THE WAKE OF THE HARDWARE SHIPPING. HERE ARE A FEW OF THE MOST NOTABLE NEXT-GEN NEWS STORIES FOLLOWING THE CONSOLE LAUNCHES



TWITCH IT OFF!

AFTER THE launch of the PlayStation 4, some users began using Playroom (an augmented-reality PS4 title set in *your living room*) and the in-built streaming function to broadcast some decidedly non-gaming content. The most disturbing? One player decided to broadcast his partner passing out, and then exposed her on camera live to an audience of hundreds. This prompted an immediate ban of the perpetrator's account, and Twitch has since pulled the ability to stream from Playroom.



NO DICE

AFTER *BATTLEFIELD 4* began suffering a slew of problems, DICE promised to stop production on all its other titles until *Battlefield 4* hits an acceptable level. All console versions of the game are riddled with bugs – crashes are frequent, textures don't load, connections drop out and simple mechanical aspects of the online just don't work. That DICE is keen to fix the game is good news, but no doubt annoying for anyone waiting patiently for *Mirror's Edge 2* or *Star Wars: Battlefront*.

DAY OF ONLINE SHOOTER
CEASE FIRE
DECEMBER 21ST 2012
#OSCEASEFIRE

CYBER CEASEFIRE

ON 21 December, a group of gamers respectfully held an in-game ceasefire in remembrance of the victims of the Sandy Hook Primary School shooting back in 2012. As positive as the event's intentions were, the idea of a gaming ceasefire attracted criticism for creating a link between cyber-violence and real-world violence. As far as we're concerned, choosing to abstain from online shooters for a day in memoriam is a respectful idea, and this just proves that gaming continues to be a divisive topic.

■ *Battlestar Galactica Online* is the inspiration behind *Entropy*. After not being able to include dogfighting in *BSGO*, Artplant wanted to work on something that could.

ENTROPY

HEADING INTO UNCHARTED TERRITORY

As any child of the *Star Wars* generation can attest to, it's impossible to look up at the night sky and not yearn for the chance to pilot a ship to the stars, to weave between meteors as enemy combatants close in around you, the glare of the distant sun lighting the way home. It's in these times of disgruntled clarity that we would turn to the digital realm to immerse ourselves in a similar experience but – and this is in spite of developers' best efforts – a space dogfighting game that replicates its thrills and urgency has yet to be discovered.

"It is, technically, quite hard to do dogfights in an MMO world, which is one of the reasons why many have tried and not many have actually delivered," explains Andy Butcher, lead designer at Artplant, as we discussed the unveiling of the studio's latest venture into space, *Entropy*. "We discovered as we developed *Battlestar Galactica Online* for Bigpoint [that] one of the things that we couldn't do at the time was create a true dogfighting experience. But customers started coming to us with requests; this was one of the things that everyone was asking for.

"Later on, as we improved our technology, we did some tech demos and we realised we are now able to produce a true dogfighting experience in an MMO environment. *Entropy* is a full-on opportunity for us to do the things we wish we could have done in *Battlestar*, to make the ultimate space MMO that we've always wanted to play. *Entropy* is a game about skill and earning your right to your stuff – that's something we will always stay true to."

Hearing the team talk so passionately about the project is inspiring. Traditionally, combat falls by the wayside to various other in-game systems. Of course, *Entropy* still includes an open universe ripe for exploration, with extensive trading and salvaging systems for those who prefer a little more diplomacy in their travels. Still, it's the real-time combat that Artplant is focusing on, and the studio seems confident in its ability to host compelling combat that it isn't restricting the player vs player content to small groups of well-armed militia flagged for PvP. The universe is a dangerous place, and 100-player battles await anyone brave enough to strap an ion cannon to the hull of their ship.

"This is one of the things we are testing in early access and currently optimising," explains Butcher. "*Entropy* will be able to support 100 players in one PvP fight. In terms of our servers, we have 102 star systems, and within them there are lots of different sectors, so we can have thousands of players in the current universe." Interestingly, Butcher also promises that *Entropy* won't phase players out of space sectors; instead, a split will be made between US and EU servers to help with latency issues. However, once you're logged in, you're in. As long as you have your buddies' co-ordinates, you shouldn't have an issue grouping up for interstellar good times. "Obviously, we will have one [shard] for US and one for EU, because it is a dogfighting game and we need the lower latency, but other than that we want to keep everyone inside the same universe. We want to avoid instancing the same sector

INFORMATION

FORMAT: **PC**
PUBLISHER: **Jagex**
DEVELOPER: **Artplant**
ORIGIN: **Norway**
RELEASE: **Out now (Steam Early Access)**

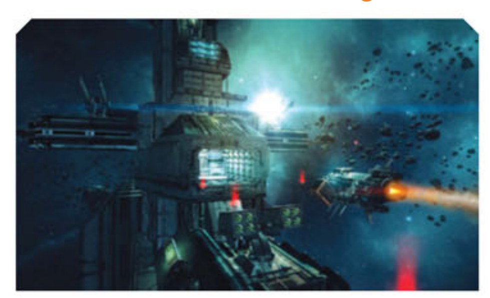


■ Artplant is taking a risk, ditching free-to-play and subscription models in favour of a one-time fee.





"Entropy is a game about skill and earning your right to your stuff – that's something we will always stay true to"



While the focus is on real-time combat, *Entropy* also features mining, trading and 'dynamic' missions.



Entropy is available on Steam Early Access, though it'll cost you if you want to keep your progress for launch.

over and over again. We support a lot of players and big, hectic dogfights."

Entropy has come at a good time. It is live on Steam Early Access giving players the opportunity to help test its systems, mechanics and servers before it goes fully live later this year. Perhaps it's the dawn of a new generation, but it feels like space games are going through something of a renaissance. *EVE Online* continues to hold steady, *Star Citizen* and *Elite* are on the way and we'd be remiss if we didn't mention Oculus Rift title *EVE: Valkyrie* – a game that has the real-time space combat crown in its sights. None of this concerns Artplant. The studio works under a simple premise: the universe is a large place, and so is the videogames industry.

"We didn't deliberately set out to copy [anyone] or set out to do something different to EVE," says Jack Wulf, CEO at Artplant, as we drew similarities to other space sims. "There were just certain things we wanted to do as players, and the kinds of things we wanted in a space game we just didn't feel like we could get anywhere else. That's why we are making *Entropy*, because it is something that we wanted to play. We feel like we are offering a different experience to *EVE* – there's room for more than one space game in the market."

Entropy is still in its earliest days, but the Early Access build already shows plenty of promise. There's no doubting that it's going to be tough, but the studio is taking space sims to a brave new frontier. If Artplant can replicate the heart-stopping thrills that can only come from being surrounded by enemies from all sides while the harsh realities of space begin to zero in, then *Entropy* will be something not even the titans of the market can silence.



With *Elite, Star Citizen* and *EVE: Valkyrie* on the way, the skies are about to get very crowded indeed.

A ONE-OFF

NO FREE-TO-PLAY OR SUBSCRIPTION MODEL

ONE CONCERN with the launch of any new MMO, be it sci-fi or fantasy, is its distribution method. We've seen plenty of titles launch with subscriptions only to default to a free-to-play model a few months down the line or – let's be honest here – fold entirely. Artplant is taking a different approach; the studio is asking players to pay one fee and have access to the entire game. It's a tough task in this highly competitive market, especially with the rising cost of maintaining servers. "At the moment we don't have any, and we don't have any plans for [in-game monetisation]," claims Andy Butcher. "Obviously, it's an MMO, so for us to continue adding awesome new features and to maintain everything, we need a constant revenue stream. It's something we might look at in the future, but the most fitting thing for us is a DLC route."

ONLINE UPDATES

THE LATEST DEVELOPMENTS IN THE WORLD OF ONLINE GAMING

OPEN THE GATES OF TAMRIEL

ZeniMax Online has finally announced the release date for its upcoming MMO *The Elder Scrolls Online*. It's making its way to PC on 4 April 2014, before arriving on next-gen consoles in June.



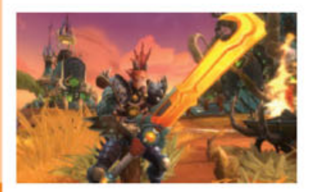
TROUBLE AT CCP

At least 15 staff have been laid off at CCP's Atlanta Office, affecting the development of its upcoming title *World Of Darkness*. It sounds like it's being re-evaluated… we wouldn't expect this one for a while.



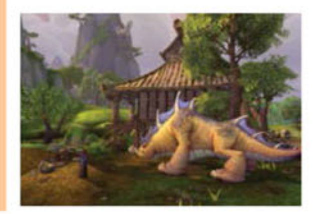
WILDSTAR'S COMING SOON – APPARENTLY

WildStar has finally unveiled its final class, the Engineer, as news of an open beta starting in early 2014 surfaced. We aren't holding our breath – Carbine seems to say that every month.



SPEND MONEY FASTER

Blizzard has finally integrated an in-game store into *World Of Warcraft* and our wallets are already weeping. The Battle.net Shop is primarily focused on selling mounts, pets and items that go directly into your inventory.





VITAL STATS

YEARS ACTIVE: 1

EU SERVERS: 4

CURRENT MAPS: 3

ESTIMATED MAP SIZES: 64 square km

FACTIONS: 3

CLASSES: Light Assault, Heavy Assault, Infiltrator, Engineer, Combat Medic, MAX Armour Suit

VEHICLE TYPES: 8 per side, 12 total (Bike, Jeep, Tank, APC, Heavy Tank, Light Air, Gunship, Troop Transport)

CONVERSION RATE: £8 > 1000SC (+500 bonus)

BOOSTS: 50% XP, 50% Resource Gain (1hr to 7 days)

OPTIONAL SUBSCRIPTION: £9 per month for priority login, 25-50% boosts, early cosmetic access

CHARACTERS PER ACCOUNT: 3

PS4 RELEASE: Early 2014

BEGINNER'S GUIDE

PLANETSIDE 2

SIGN UP TO A THREE-WAY WAR WITHOUT END… BUT WITH VEHICLES, BATTLE ARMOUR AND THOUSANDS OF SOLDIERS IN THE FIGHT

When the original *PlanetSide* came out in 2003, it was one of those games that everyone wanted to play, but almost nobody actually could. Open world warfare, taxing net connections and system specifications, and with proper shooting instead of MMO-style combat. It was a game years ahead of its time… about ten in fact, and only now has its time finally come to shine. *PlanetSide 2*'s sheer scope still makes it feel like a game with as many witches on its development team as programmers, but anyone with a decent PC (or soon, a PS4) can play with ease.

And here's the best part - it's free to play, and the good kind of free; the kind that actually means it. Paying will speed up your progress and unlock gears faster, but the sheer scale of engagements means that even a raw recruit with free guns can air-drop into a combat zone and begin racking up kills in no time at all. There are no specific maps or rounds in *PlanetSide*'s warzone, just one world with ever-shifting battle lines.

One minute a base can be a silent place to resupply. The next, it becomes a highly charged flashpoint between two battalions, or gets rolled over without a fight because nobody was there to defend it. You've played FPS games before, but we can assure you they were nothing like this.

Which guide would you like to see tackled next?
Let us know on Twitter or Facebook

CALL TO ARMS

GETTING STARTED WITH PLANETSIDE 2

CREATE YOUR SOLDIER

1 THERE ARE THREE empires to choose from: Terran Republic, New Conglomerate and Vanu. There's not a vast amount of difference between them, save a few unique vehicles/bits of gear. Pick one, somehow find a name that isn't taken and you're in. There's no need to pick a class. There are six once in, including Light Assault, Engineer and Infiltrator, each with their own weapons and unlocks. Heavy Assault is a good starter, with decent weapons to play with. Light Assault isn't as tough, but does get a free jetpack.





THE ART OF WAR

2 *PLANETSIDE 2* IS about territory control. A specific vehicle, the Sunderer, can act as a mobile spawn point that can be used to invade or simply provide a more tactical recovery point. Killing other players gets them out of the way, but otherwise contributes little - they just respawn and return. To be effective, it's worth immediately joining a squad and deploying together. A good squad has a purpose and a leader. Even without one though, there's extra safety in numbers.

(VERY) BASIC TRAINING

3 *PLANETSIDE 2* ORIGINALLY just dropped everyone into battle. Now, there's a proper tutorial that quickly explains details. Pay attention; in game, you'll be expected to know it. The key details are seeing precisely what points in enemy bases to capture or destroy to knock down forcefields and claim territory, and that small arms fire is useless against tanks. Once done though, you'll still be thrown into the biggest battle in the area, and this is *PlanetSide*. There's no auto-balancing, and no newbie area. You find yourself surrounded by enemies? You're screwed! (Don't worry though, there's no death penalty.) You can also redeploy to friendly bases, press I to top right into another skirmish, or answer specific calls for reinforcements.



BECOMING THE BEST

4 LEVELLING IN *PLANETSIDE* isn't about increasing power as such, but earning 'certs' that unlock more options. It's possible to buy all weapons outright using real money, but abilities can only be earned in-game (with the option to buy a boost to do this faster). Basic rifle? Free. Upgraded rifle? Pay or play. Scope for that rifle? Play. You also have to unlock vehicle skills, which are classed independent but just as important. The Sunderer's mobile spawn, for instance, has to be unlocked, or it's just an APC. For this reason, it's best to specialise in one or two classes/vehicles. *PlanetSide 2* isn't pay-to-win though, with so many players naturally equalising a few gear differences, and many purchasable weapons being fairly situation-specific upgrades anyway.



STAYING IN TOUCH

5 MOST PLAYERS DON'T talk in *PlanetSide 2*, but that doesn't mean you shouldn't. Coordination is key. Since you don't have time to type, a microphone and VOIP is ideal. Otherwise, hold down V for voice macros like 'help' and 'I need ammo' that will usually be ignored. More useful is to target a friendly vehicle like a Sunderer and hold down Q. This pops up an option to request a ride, both getting you into battle faster and providing some support when arriving.

ONLINE GUILD CHAT

The most pertinent questions facing online developers today



Phil Mansell

Executive producer, Jagex, RuneScape

After releasing a massive update last summer, RuneScape 3 has launched a brutal campaign against gold farmers to protect its economy and give power back to the player

How has the open beta for your HTML5 build been received?
Because of the nature of HTML5, there's been some variable quality with how the game operates on different hardware, but we are seeing more players move over to it. *RuneScape* has a very veteran player-base – most accounts are over six years old, and so you do see slower migration. Because we keep the Java and HTML5 builds pretty much at parity, moving your account across is seamless – you can load up the same account you've had for years in HTML5 and it isn't a problem.

Do you think there's a definitive answer to the gold-farming problem?
I think we're pretty close to overcoming the gold-farming subculture. We've got various strategies for identifying and dealing with the issue, both in supply and demand. Our 'bot-watch' technology, for example, examines behavioural heuristics of players and can detect suspicious activity – that way we can ban accounts farming the gold in-game – and we've also introduced Bonds, tradable in-game items that can be freely gifted or traded for any other in-game item. This means that paid services can be earned in-game, taking away the demand for gold from farmers.

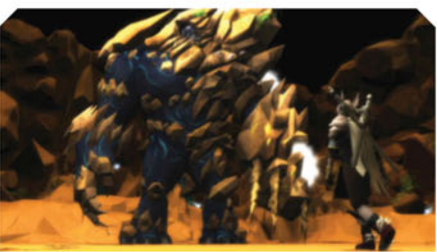
How have players reacted to this?
Because we've got such a veteran user-base, there was a lot of scepticism at first, but that turned around pretty quickly; walking around *RuneScape* now, there are fewer farmers, fewer bots spamming their messages to buy gold, and nicer stories. You hear about people that couldn't make it to our community event, RuneFest, because they perhaps couldn't afford a ticket, then you see other players all chip in and give them bonds which can be exchanged for the price of a ticket. There's some really uplifting stuff going on.

Our main interest is keeping the game's economy open; *RuneScape* has always had a free market and we want to maintain that – we've got balancing specialists involved with the game, for bigger updates we have player visits and we've even got a five-person data analytics team working on the system; we're putting PhD level attention on data science.

Can we expect to see *RuneScape* on console any time soon?
We're looking at it, that's all I can say. It helps that we've got good relationships with the platform holders, but there aren't any imminent announcements.

How is a tablet/mobile version coming along?
We've spent a *lot* of time on development and research for a tablet version of *RuneScape* – we want the game to be exactly the same as the one you'd play on a browser. That goal's been a lot harder to achieve than we thought it would, and we've made a big effort to get there. Our ideal goal is for *RuneScape* to be device agnostic – running exactly the same across every platform.

> "Our ideal goal is for RuneScape to be device agnostic – running exactly the same across every platform"



Using HTML5, rather than Java, allows *RuneScape 3* to use your computer's graphical hardware, taking pressure off the CPU.



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